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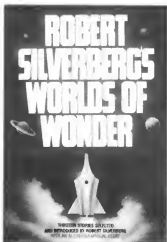


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"Extras" is about a movie company that comes to a wind-swept prairie town in North Dakota for a month of location filming. Among the extras they hire are Indian and Candy, who says, "To be in a movie. Wouldn't it just make your life over!" Robert Wilson's most recent novel is MEMORY WIRE (Bantam).

EXTRAS

By Robert Charles Wilson



1.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1983, AN MGM/UA production unit arrived in Clapham and took over

the local high school for five weeks of location filming, August and a week into September of that hot year. I watched from the pumps at the Clapham Texaco as their astonishing trucks — three diesel trailers and ten Winnebagos — labored in from the blue North Dakota horizon like ships against the wind. Like ships, they carried cargo from distant places; like ships, they were bringing us — though we were not then aware of it — a new map of the world.

No one in Clapham knew what to expect from the movie people. They were Hollywood, with all the money and sophistication that name still implies. We were fascinated and even a little afraid of them — the Lutherans started up a movement to have them banned from the city limits, on the theory that they would import homosexuality and wholesale drug addiction. But that was never the issue. Oh, I do not doubt there were

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some or perhaps many lines of cocaine consumed out at the Travelodge, but most of us could deal with that. We are a long way out, but we get *Time* magazine. A small town, but I attended Robert A. Taft High School for four years, and I can vouch that we do not have a crying need to import our vices.

The real threat they posed was very different. "Glamorous" is a word we used often those summer months, but here is a curious fact: when I looked up "glamour" in the dictionary, it said, "Magic, enchantment, beauty, ephemeral charm," and that is surprisingly near to the truth.

The project they had come to film was a musical remake of *High School Confidential*. The original — you may remember — featured Russ Tamblyn as a tough high school kid and Mamie Van Doren as his sexy aunt. Except, Russ is really a narcotics agent and Mamie is his cover. The MGM/UA version (you may also remember, but probably don't) dresses up the plot with knife-edge Technicolor and screaming Dolby rockabilly numbers. It would play for a couple of slow weeks in the cities and retire finally to a shadow life on cable TV, but in '83 we didn't know any of that. We were struck with the glamour and secretiveness of the project and how strange the Robert A. Taft looked, ringed round with sodium lamps and silver umbrellas.

It was the school that had attracted the location scout: a big, ornate brick high school erected in the forties to serve the five sprawling counties around Clapham. Clapham itself is not much. The movie company was put up in the Holiday Inn and the Travelodge a few miles west of downtown along the interstate, and they would take lunch occasionally at the McDonald's or the Country Kitchen within a couple of blocks of the school, but they did not interact much with the townspeople until mid-August, when they put an ad in the town paper asking for extras.

I heard about it when Candy came out to the Texaco with the quarter-page ad clutched in her hand. "It's our chance," she said breathlessly. "Come on, Indian! We *have* to."

And because we did not deny ourselves these impulses, and because I was in love with her, I told her yeah, O.K., and spent an hour scrubbing the grease out from under my nails with a bar of Lava soap.

The lineup the next morning wound out from the gym door and across

the broad Taft parking lot. The ad asked for people "between the ages of 18 and 30" and "in good physical condition," but we had men out there who had turned thirty under the Truman administration, and housewives who outweighed the casting director by 150 pounds. It was obscene. I told Candy so.

"But I know why they're here," she said. "They're here because it would mean something. To be in a movie. Christ," she said wistfully, "it's true, isn't it? Wouldn't it just make your life over?"

I had combed up my hair duck-ass style, had put on a tight white Hanes T-shirt with a pack of Camels rolled into the sleeve. Candy, who was good-looking enough to be a natural anyway, had raided the attic for her father's moth-eaten football sweater and her mom's cheerleader skirt. I felt more than a little ridiculous dressed this way, and it drew us some sneers from the crowd, but Candy wanted to impress the casting director with, at least, our sincerity.

And we had nothing to lose. We were back-of-tracks people. Back-of-tracks is not exactly the poor part of town. You could say it is the part of town where Clapham wears its poverty most conspicuously. The prosperous Reagan years did not much rub off on Clapham or on the agricultural land around it. Which was another reason we were there: it would be day work, and we needed day work.

That was, at least, why I was there. Candy had her own reasons. She was as energetic that hot August morning as I have ever seen her. Standing in the long line in front of the gymnasium door of Robert A. Taft, she fairly vibrated. She watched the movie people lolling around their trailers, crisp white shirts tucked into tight sky-blue Levi's, and her eyes were very wide. "Wouldn't it be great," she said, "to go away with them? If they would take you away?"

"Can't happen." We shuffled forward across the gravel. "It doesn't even happen in the movies anymore."

"You never know, Indian. You can't be too sure."

I didn't press it. Part of the connection between us was that we did not question such assertions. I worked evenings and weekends at the Texaco; Candy did waitressing and pretended to be saving money for college. I lived in a trailer on which I could not meet the payments; she lived with her mother, who worked as a beautician at the Cut-&-Curl. Ask anybody, and they would tell you we had no prospects. Two back-of-tracks losers in

a cash-poor prairie town, broke but not even broke enough to be interesting. And I suppose, in a way, that was true. But we would not admit to it. We hated the idea.

We were special. We told each other so. "We're special," Candy would say, "and don't you forget it, Indian!"

But in the end I was not the one who forgot.

The line wormed into the big school auditorium. Inside, the casting director or his assistant — I could not sort these people out — sat in a bored pose behind a folding table, marking a clipboard and nodding yea or nay at the candidates. He had already collected a sizable crowd of people of approximately our age, sidelined under the basketball hoop with smug conquerors' smiles. "So many," Candy whispered, suddenly less sure of herself. And then we were at the front of the line — finally — and my hands, like nervous animals, burrowed into my pockets.

The casting director examined us together. "That's cute," he said. "Dressing up like that."

We nodded. Cute, yeah. We squirmed.

"O.K.," he said finally. "You're fine. I'll need your names."

I was astonished. Candy smiled.

"Candice Tucker," she said levelly.

The movie man wrote it down. "Candice," he said. "Good. Welcome, Candice."

And then his eyes were on me.

I swallowed once hard. I felt a sudden, urgent sense of doubt. We had come here too casually. This was strange territory we had entered; the rules were different; caution was vital. Candy's attitude — her gap-jawed infatuation — struck me as dangerously naive.

"Your name," the man said.

She nudged me from behind.

"Jack," I said reluctantly. "Jack Hokeah."

I spelled it. He wrote it down. "Hokeah?"

"We call him Indian," Candy said.

They call me "Indian" because of my father. He was not a Sioux, as you might expect — North Dakota is "the Sioux State" — but a Kiowa half blood who came north in the sixties to work on the missile bases going up all through the area. He died when I was young but, looking back, it

seems ironic to me that he should have married into this tribe of rural North Dakota whites, a tribe as doomed, I sometimes think, as the Hurons, the Nanticokes, or the Mohegans.

Because my mother was white, our family was estranged even from the people of back-of-tracks Clapham — not outcasts exactly, but never really close to anyone but ourselves. Much of this was casual racism, the unthinking rejection of an obvious outsider. But on another level I think our estrangement was more profound. There *was* something odd about my father, something subtler than skin color or “cultural heritage,” and I wonder if people didn’t feel it.

I know I felt it. I felt it because I shared it. Clapham is a high-plains prairie town; the west wind sluices like a river through these old blacktop streets, and I will tell you a secret: it talks. The wind talks. If you listen closely, you can hear it.

At least, I could.

And I could talk to it — though I had promised Candy, many years ago, that I would not.

We showed up at Taft on the appointed day, naively expecting all the apparatus of stardom: makeup, wardrobe, scripts to memorize. Instead, they sent us to the Teachers’ Lounge and told us to wait till we were called.

It didn’t matter to Candy. She had caught a glimpse of the lights and the cameras; it was enough. I saw the glint in her eyes and felt, even then, a tingle of disquiet.

What I had not realized about extra work is how tedious it is. Movie work in general, I suppose. I was surprised at how little sense there was of *telling a story*. Candy had read the movie magazine her mother brought home from the Cut-&-Curl, and understood it better. The screenwriter, she said, tells the story. And, later, the movie editor tells the story. In between there are only scenes, bits, dialogue, yards and miles of footage. Our director was a meticulous bald man of about thirty-five who shot everything half a dozen times and who would become famous, a couple of years later, for going ruinously overbudget on a B horror movie. So mostly we waited, and when we did work, the work was mechanical. Picture it: a cafeteria scene. We tiptoe behind the stars, who are doing dialogue, tracked by a crane microphone. There is a diffuse white light everywhere. We take trays; we take cutlery; we take little plastic dishes of watery

Jell-O. We do all this daintily so as not to obscure the dialogue. Four times, five times, six times. Then we do it again without the actors, and this time we rattle our cutlery and shake our trays and mumble to each other: a microphone take, to be blended into the sound track. It is a kind of jigsaw puzzle, assembled separately elsewhere.

But the waiting took up most of our time. We waited in the Teachers' Lounge, where the small swivel television was tuned to a Fargo station that showed syndicated reruns all afternoon: "The Andy Griffith Show," "Dick Van Dyke," "Doctor Kildare." Black-and-white TV, warm Coke, a sedative haze of cigarette smoke: for me, that was August of '83. Easy money, yes, but also trivial and tedious money.

And yet . . . the lights would shine; the camera would glide silently forward; the gym or the cafeteria would take on a momentary sunlit shimmer. It was strange and undoubtedly magical, and in those moments I think I felt a little of what Candy must have felt.

Reflected glory. Brief stardom.

Glamour.

She looked good in wardrobe. Her kind of figure had been out of style in Hollywood since the era of Monroe, but she looked good on the set — in the casting director's words, very "period." And she took to the makeup. Bright lipstick accenting her mobile mouth, a little shadow around her blue eyes; sun-bleached hair in bangs, her breasts like a proud badge of sexuality. I noticed some of the movie people checking her out. A cameraman told her she was "photogenic" — coming on to her, but Candy chose to take the compliment at face value. For all I know, it might have been sincere. She was very good-looking.

And, yes, I checked myself out in the available mirrors once or twice. Who wouldn't? You can see me in a couple of shots. They dressed me in peg jeans rolled at the cuff, a leather jacket — the bad-boy look.

On me it worked. You can recognize me by the hawk nose, slightly dark complexion, brown eyes hooded under thick eyebrows and bushy black hair. Acceptably Anglo, but with a hint of something darker.

Candy and I hung together on the set. We were a unit. We stayed separate from the other extras because we were back-of-tracks, and from the movie people because we were local. But it was the Hollywood people who took the greater interest in us.

And, of course, vice versa.

Over the duration of that first week, I became aware that I was watching Candy fall in love.

The stars of the film were Bobby Angle and a nineteen-year-old girl named Lee Ann Morgan. These were, if not big names, at least "promising" names; rising talent, youth-cult stars. Bobby was blue-eyed and sandy-haired, maybe five-foot-ten and with a certain Napoleonic swagger in his walk. Lee Ann was blonde, with bruised eyes and a lithe dancer's body.

Candy dragged me out of the lounge one time to watch them dance. "Hurry up, Indian . . . they're in the gym! If we stay out of the way, we can watch."

They were, yes, talented. Candy and I pushed in among a dozen others to watch, and for a span of time the enterprise took on the air of real theater. They did their own dancing. Lee Ann whirled up and came down splay-legged on the slick gymnasium floor. Bobby leaped over her, grinning.

Candy's eyes were batted on them both. That was O.K. What worried me was the way she watched. She was deaf to the puerile music and indifferent to the idiot plot — the *machinery* of the thing. For her there was only Bobby and Lee Ann out there in the cruel light, spinning and flying, smiles blazing at the camera. She stared at them for long minutes after the dance sequence finished, at Lee Ann toweling her hair, at Bobby drinking Gatorade from a checkerboard thermos. Bobby threw her a wink. She smiled.

I touched her shoulder. "Dinner tonight?"

"I guess so," she said.

2.

Later I took her driving.

I drive a secondhand Jeep CJ I bought from a guy at a hardship sale in '81. I've done some work on it. It goes pretty good. If I sold it, maybe I could meet the payments on my trailer.

Because Clapham is a small town, it is easy to leave. I drove out along the arc of the interstate. We lowered our shades against the setting sun and let the hot wind tug at us. Candy did not seem talkative, and for a time we just drove. I had in mind parking out by the quarry, smoking some back-of-tracks homegrown, and renewing the friendship. It was a ritual we

had established long ago. Drive out to the quarry and not talk about the Texaco station, her restaurant job, the bric-a-brac of our ordinary lives. Play the radio instead. Dance by moonlight. Make love on the sandy verge of the quarry or under the dark trees: we had done that.

But — as it happened — not tonight.

We were passing the Travelodge where some of the movie people were billeted, when Candy spotted Teddy Taylor's business truck pulling into the lot. "Slow down a minute," she said.

I should explain that we hated Teddy with the fervor of the oppressed. He ran Clapham's only laundry business, pickup and delivery. You would see him behind the counter, thirty-five years old, 250 pounds moving somehow sweatlessly through the miasma of high summer and steam heat. He was relentlessly suspicious of the back-of-tracks people who occasionally, like Candy, came in with a work uniform to be laundered. Cash in advance. It was humiliating.

Since June, Teddy had been picking up laundry from both the motels and telling endless and queasily suggestive stories about it. Handkerchiefs and underwear, Teddy said: show him those two items, and he'd tell you anything about a person. It disturbed me especially because it seemed to reflect Clapham's response to the arrival of the movie people, the way we used them to glamorize ourselves. But I could not say that to Candy.

The road was empty. I drove up on the shoulder and put the Jeep in neutral.

"Steamcleaner to the stars," I said.

Teddy was climbing out the back of his van with a big brown-paper bundle. Candy said, "What do you suppose he's got?"

"Bobby's bikini briefs."

"Yeah?"

"Lee Ann's training bra."

She dimpled. "Compared to me, maybe."

Then Teddy, maneuvering his own bulk down from the van, lost his footing and grabbed for support. The big laundry bundle flew out of his hands, and when it hit blacktop, the taut brown waxed paper burst open; a wildflower of laundry blossomed out. We were a football field away, but we could hear Teddy's profanities over the rumble of the Jeep.

A wind had come up. Teddy moved over the parking lot like a manic linebacker, tackling clothes. It was a great show, and we watched it happily

until the dusk came down and Teddy, still cursing, had thrown everything into the back of his truck and slammed the door on it.

He passed us headed back to Clapham at about ninety-five miles per. I put my hand on the gearshift.

"No," Candy said suddenly. "Look. He missed something."

It was hard to see in the gathering darkness, but I looked where she pointed, and saw something flimsy swirl up past the heated azure pool of the Travelodge and into the dry hills beyond. Candy put her hand on my knee. "Indian, let's get it."

I looked to see if she was serious. "Souvenir?"

"Yeah. Maybe. See how the other half lives." She was in an odd and mischievous mood. "Come on, Indian!"

I shrugged and parked the Jeep.

I liked these old, dry hills. I had come up here often when I was little. My father would take me up.

He didn't talk to me about his past. I found out much later he had been a Kiowa Road Man for a long part of his life, in Quanah Parker's old and notorious church, the peyote church. I do not know if this is relevant. It reflects, I guess, his connection with what we would call the supernatural; and I have heard a rumor that he was barred from the Native American Church in Oklahoma on suspicion of being a witch. Maybe. He never spoke of it. I remember one time — I could not have been more than five — I found his rosary of mescal beads in a dresser drawer and began to play with it. He took it away, not angrily but firmly, and I realized, I think, even then, that there were parts of his life that meant a great deal to him but that he could not share with me or with my mother.

He spoke impeccable and educated English. Most of my vocabulary I picked up from him. It used to irritate my teachers, who believed — on the basis of my ethnicity and, to be charitable, my childhood stutter — that I ought to be illiterate. (My essays were subject to grave suspicion: had I plagiarized them?) More that this, though, he imparted to me a sense of the larger world.

I do not mean specifically the cities and oceans that lie beyond the horizon. I mean "the big world" — his words.

He would take me out to these hills in our old Ford pickup.

Summer or winter, day or night. I think it frightened my mother. She

My given name was Jack, but even then all my friends called me Indian.

loved this strange man she had married (over fearsome family objections), but she was also a little jealous of the communication between us. I think she half suspected that he was indoctrinating me into some secret ritual. Maybe he was. He once said, "It's an old gift." And smiled. "In the family."

The wind, he would say.

It surged across these low, barren hills from the west. Cold sometimes and sometimes warm; almost always dry. Face it, and it would sweep the moisture from your skin. Think, he said sternly, how far it comes. Over that knife-edged prairie horizon it comes. From the Badlands, he said, where monsters are buried. From far place beyond that. From the ocean. From China. The wind, he said: you think it doesn't notice? But you can't travel that far and not notice. The wind isn't stupid. The wind pays attention. The wind knows more than you know.

"Talk to it," he said.

I was young enough to take him literally. "That's dumb," I said.

"Like this," he said, and I felt his big hand tighten on mine.

He called down a whirlwind.

It was a dust devil. A tiny one. It swept up the hillside, brown and playful. It spun three times around us. When it moved toward me, I jumped back, frightened. But the wind was timid, too.

I turned to look at my father. His name was Spencer. For no obvious reason, it struck me then that he had a name. Spencer Hokeah. My given name was Jack, but even then all my friends called me Indian. My father, Spencer Hokeah, familiar and foreign, looked at me and smiled. "You try it," he said.

I was helpless. I was not even certain he had done what he appeared to have done. The wind? Was this possible?

"Shh," he said. "Be still a minute. Just listen to it."

Curious, I made myself relax.

The only sound was the wind in the prairie grass and in the scrub trees, a hissing compounded of a thousand voices. I listened carefully and watched my father. He nodded.

I thought about what he had said. It had come a long way, the wind.

It was already a thousand years old, I thought, when it carried the thunderheads in from the ocean. It whirled as high as the stars. It had lived winters and summers, cold and hot. It had kissed the moisture from desert wastes vaster than this dull sky around me. It was — and I felt this with an enormity I cannot communicate — the *wind*.

And I began to sense what my father meant.

He smiled as if I had said the words aloud. "Right," he said.

"Here," I breathed.

It was much less than a word; but the wind — recognized and somehow recognizing — began to focus around me.

It plucked at the turned-up cuffs of my jeans. Wild, it carried my hair back.

"Here!" I said.

A gust from some ancient dry barranca whipped my face.

"Here!"

The bent trees bent lower. The prairie grass flailed at the sky. I was aware of clouds tumbling over the horizon now, miles and miles distant. I *felt* them — the wet density of them. The electricity of them. The chafing of ions from the dust-dry land beneath.

Far off, lightning cracked down. Bitter droplets of rain spattered against us.

"Easy," my father said. (Spencer Hokeah said.)

My clothes whipped tight against my body. My good baseball cap had flown away. My father stood firm against what was, obviously now, an oncoming storm. Feeling it, I was suddenly frightened.

He picked me up.

The wind abated.

"It's O.K.," he said, the words a growling in his chest. "But powerful, you understand? Strong and strange. No matter how big you get, it's bigger. That's how life is. The world. It's bigger than you are. You talk to it, right? But it's always always bigger than you are."

I nodded against his body.

"One day," he said, "it will kill you."

I thought he meant me — me particularly. I huddled into his chest.

But that wasn't what he meant.

Five years later it killed him. Not the wind: the big world. It was a laryngeal cancer, and it made him mute before it choked him. This seemed

terrible to me, unbearable, unendurable. He had been the pivot of my life; his disappearance — into silence and finally into death — was deeply shocking. It mystified me that he retained, in his profound illness, the strength to smile. But he *did* smile. He would smile. He would smile and clutch my hand. Before he lost the power of speech, he told me, "You are important, Jack. You matter."

As if *that* were the issue.

I think now that he was facing death the way he faced the wind: feeling its power and its inevitability, the mystery of it — talking to it. He could not veer it away from him any more than he could harness a tornado or soften the cold heart of a thunderstorm. But he could make it dance a little.

"He suffered," the doctor told me, "far less than he had any right to." Dancing, I thought. Yeah.

We watched the item of laundry flit over a rise and out of sight behind it. "Getting dark," I said.

Candy hesitated. At night these hills seem to buck up; the valleys deepen. There is not much ambient light out west of Clapham. The motels, the town itself a couple of miles away, the moon — that's about it. "Just over the rise," she said. "Then we go back."

"You're crazy," I said. "You know that? Chasing somebody's goddamn underwear. . . ."

"We're both crazy." We topped the ridge.

It was caught on the branch of a scrubby tree where the wind had left it. We came up short. I stared.

Candy drew in her breath. "Sweet Jesus," she said, "will you look at this?" But I was already looking.

It was a peignoir, she explained — "A kind of nightgown. A woman's thing."

"There's not much to it."

"There's not supposed to be much of it." She took a step closer, mesmerized. "Indian," she said, "it's gorgeous. Even dusty and all. I wonder whom it belongs to?"

But we had the same thought: *Lee Ann*.

We sat down on the stony soil as if we were kids. After a time I said, "We should give it back."

"No." She shook her head. "We can't even let on we've seen it. It's private. You can tell." She gazed up longingly. "It's what she is. That peignoir. That's *her* up there. Fragile. Beautiful. . . ."

"Expensive," I said.

"Expensive." She turned to look at me, strangely serious. There was enough light to see her lips pulled taut, "That, too. And you know what hurts, Indian? I'll never own anything like that."

It was the kind of thing we had agreed never to say; it made me sorry we had come out here. "Sure you will."

"No," she said. "Shit, no. I'll be buying blouses at Kresges for the rest of my life. I'm beginning to understand that." She sighed. "They live a different life, Indian. They come from a different place, and they live a different life."

She looked up at the nightgown. It hung against the dark sky like a rebuke, a bright feather from an exotic bird scathingly feminine against the desolation of the hills and the night. "We don't get that kind of stuff. We just don't ever get that."

"Come on, Candy. We're special, remember?"

"Right. Special. But —" She nodded in the direction of the motels. "Not as special as *they* are."

A gust of wind fluttered the fragile peignoir. It waved from the tree branch like a conqueror's flag.

The wind seemed to make Candy nervous. "Let's go," she said. "Let's drive."

We hurried away.

3.

Not quite a week later, over dinner at the Country Kitchen, she asked me what I would think if she went out on a date — just one time — with Bobby Angle.

The question was not frivolous. I settled back into the vinylette booth and thought about it. Outside the plate-glass restaurant window, the cars were parked in neat diagonals.

I thought about Bobby and Candy. I had seen them together a couple of times at the school. He had smiled at her; she had smiled at him. I said, "Has he asked you?"

"If he did," Candy persisted, "what would you say?"

"I would say you're too good for him."

"That's sweet, Indian."

"I mean it."

She shook her head. "You don't know him."

"I know you."

"I'm no big deal."

She said it with a bleak, offhanded conviction. It made me think of what she had said in the brown hills back of the Travelodge: "Not as special as *they* are."

"We made promises," I said. "Remember?"

"I never promised I wouldn't go out with Bobby Angle."

"I don't mean that." I was getting angry. "Christ, Candy. All our lives, people have been trying to put us in our place. The pissant Taft aristocracy — the jocks and the debbs. They counted; we didn't. Except, we said, Fuck it. *We* counted. *We* were special. And I believed that. I *still* believe it. Now these movie people come into town, and suddenly everybody wants to shine their goddamn shoes. The jocks want to shine their shoes." I was honestly baffled. "Why?"

"They'll put us on the map, Indian. That's what everybody says."

"We're on the goddamn map."

"It's different. It's not high school anymore."

"No. It's the movies. So?"

She shook her head sadly. "It's the real world. *They're* the real world."

"So what does that make us?"

She stood up and put down some pocket change for the waitress. She ran her hand once through her hair.

"Extras," she said.

I hated her for saying it.

We walked separately to work. On the set, I saw her with Bobby a couple of times. I wondered if the anger I felt was jealousy, or purely jealousy. Some of that, yes, of course. But I was equally disturbed by the way she had devalued herself: the way she was clinging to Bobby Angle, the whole movie thing, as if this were the last chance to inject some significance into her life.

In the afternoon, Lee Ann, Bobby's costar, came over to where I was

leaning against the hot brick wall of the school. She handed me a Diet Coke and said, "Does it bother you?"

I stared at her. "What?"

"Bobby and your girlfriend. I saw you watching. Is it a problem for you?"

It was an outrageous question. I didn't know how to answer. She sipped at her straw and said, "Because it's not serious. I just wanted to tell you that. Bobby just likes flirting. He has an ego problem."

"Flirting," I said.

She nodded earnestly.

She was in wardrobe. A tight sweater. She was lithe, supple, and two inches shorter than I. I could have picked her up. I said, "Are you flirting?"

Her smile widened. "Could be, cowboy."

"Indian," I said.

"Whatever. Well, you know, I have a thing with Bobby. You probably noticed. But we're not monogamous. It's open." She took another pull at the Coke. "We're out of here in two weeks. Then, whatever he has going with your girlfriend, it's finished. It's over. So don't worry too much about it."

"I won't," I said.

"Who knows," she said. "Might be some fringe benefits in it for you."

I said that might be nice.

Of course, he did ask her out.

I do not know what motivated him. Perhaps it was what Lee Ann had suggested: a kind of egotism, the blind need for a worshipful audience. Or maybe a kind of misplaced noblesse oblige. He may have thought he was doing her a favor.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that he exposed the raw nerve of her secret fear, the fear of her own insignificance. And that was a bad and dangerous thing to do.

"He asked nicely," Candy reassured me. "He really did. Dinner and drinks, he said."

"And you accepted."

We were back at the Country Kitchen. The air was hot as only September can be hot, the smoldering buttend of a relentless summer. The wind scoured dust down the interstate. Half the town had been invited out to fill the Taft bleachers for the final filming, a football sequence, and

their obedient cheering washed the streets with a sound like surf.

Candy made a little speech. "We're nothing," she said. "You better think about that, Indian. Because we've been fooling ourselves, and that's not good." She waved at the window. "We're nowhere. We're beyond the borders. In ten or fifteen years, this town won't be here. Just big company farms. Or dust. As far as most people are concerned, we don't exist now. We're nothing people in a nothing town, and that's the truth."

"Bobby told you that?"

"Bobby didn't have to." She balled her fist. "I have one chance, Indian . . . one chance at a little glory, before I get old and fat and stupid like everyone else in this town. One chance! And you can't tell me not to take it."

I didn't even try. Maybe that was a mistake.

"So yes," she said. "He asked me nicely. And I accepted."

She said it defiantly, but I detected under that a sour note of resignation . . . as if she could sense, out beyond the hot horizon of her life, the bulk of winter moving.

There were promises we both had made. I should emphasize that. She thought — and maybe, at the time, I thought — that the issue was fidelity. Would she sleep with Bobby Angle? Would I sleep with Lee Ann Morgan?

But, as Candy had pointed out, those weren't the important promises. The infidelities we committed that summer were both subtler and far more profound.

The night she went off with Bobby, I got drunk.

Around nine, somebody knocked at the door of my trailer. I opened the door and recognized Lee Ann. She had on tight Levi's and a cowgirl blouse — her idea of shitkicker clothes. Her lipstick was scarlet, her eyeshadow like a bruise. It was laughable. "Hi, Indian," she said.

I gave her credit for remembering my name.

She stepped inside the narrow trailer. The room was a mess. Old clothes on the floor, beer bottles stacked in the sink, paperback novels on every horizontal surface. "Hard to find your way out here," she said.

"I like my solitude," I said.

She looked at me. "Tying one on?"

"Trying to."

"You want company?"

"What the hell."

We drank awhile. She sat in my big easy chair with her feet up, regarding me coolly. Drunkenly insolent, I passed her the bottle; she put it to her lips. No problem with that. "Thanks," she said.

"Don't make yourself sick."

"I don't get sick." She drank aggressively; the look on her face as she tilted up the bottle was thoughtful.

After a while she said, "I think he really does want to screw her."

"You mean Bobby?"

"Bobby and Candy. God, doesn't it sound awful? 'Bobby and Candy.' Christ."

I rolled around the names a few times. "You said he does this a lot."

"He does. I don't mind sometimes. Really. But sometimes it pisses me off."

"Pisses you off?"

"You're not the only one, cowboy."

I didn't bother to correct her.

We talked some more. She told me about her family. Her father operated a defense-contract factory somewhere in the San Fernando Valley; she had a brother at Annapolis and a sister at Bryn Mawr. "Daddy wasn't too thrilled when I went into acting. But he came around. The important thing, he says, is to do it well." She pulled at the bottle. "I could be a star. I know that for a fact."

"I thought you were a star."

"This shitty project? Yeah, right. But it's work. There are two things you can be, Daddy says: a success and a failure. So — so—" She lost track of herself. She gave the bottle back. "I would like to be a success with Bobby. I really would."

We fell into silence. After a while I said, "Look, I'll drive you home."

"It's O.K., Indian. I like it here."

"I don't."

She shrugged. We climbed into her car, one of the MGM cars; I slipped behind the wheel. It was a hot night, but the air was moving; there were stars. I detected a flash of heat lightning way off beyond the margin of the sky. We drove out the interstate, and there was no traffic, only a couple of transport rigs screaming down the night, and I drove carefully but too fast. We came into the parking lot of the Travelodge, and I did a ninety-degree

skid on the greasy blacktop. "Wow," Lee Ann said respectfully. She had the bottle balanced in her hand.

She started for the motel, tugging my hand. I tugged back. Not there. "This way," I said.

She peered out into the dark, low hills and shivered once. "Spooky," she said.

"It's O.K.," I said.

I thought of Candy and Bobby, maybe together in one of those darkened rooms. I thought of promises made and promises broken.

We stumbled over a couple of scrub dunes and then sat down in the darkness with our backs to the motels, the interstate, the town: facing the open parabola of the sky. "You are weird, cowboy," she said, and kissed me once. It was a Hollywood kiss, prolonged and insincere. I returned it with a certain drunken fervor, but after a time she pulled away.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just thinking of Bobby."

I told her I understood.

We drank some more. I said, "I took Candy up here once."

She looked at me, her eyes half closed. She smiled knowingly. "Yeah?"

"We were kids," I said. "She was fourteen. I was fifteen. I wanted to impress her." I lay back with my hand behind my head. "I was back-of-tracks. Does that mean anything to you? She was, too; but I was Indian, I had this stutter—"

"Not too cool," Lee Ann said.

"Right. So I took her up here. I wanted to matter. I guess I wanted her to love me. We sat awhile in the grass. I didn't know what to say. Finally I just told her to watch."

Lee Ann's eyelids drifted down. She said sleepily, "Watch what?"

I gulped at the bottle. Drunkenly, I concentrated.

A breeze came swooping out of the clear night sky.

It felt good. It was like meeting an old and well-loved friend. I felt it like a thrill through me: *the big world*.

I held the wind in my fist and told Lee Ann what I had told Candy those years ago. "There's a lot in the world nobody notices. Sun, sky, wind, rain. You don't pay attention. But it's out there; it's always out there. And if you listen just right — and if you use the right words — you can talk to it."

"Talk to it," Lee Ann said hazily.

But I was caught up in the memory.

I had been fifteen — it was the majority of a decade ago, not long after my father died — but I must have felt in Candy even then her yearning toward significance, her pressing need to *matter*. And I suppose I thought it would satisfy her, the trick I could do with the wind. It would demonstrate my specialness.

She listened to me talk, and waited, curious, not understanding, while I called down the wind. It was a sunny blue day, but there was a storm due; I could feel it. I urged it closer. She sat with her sundress pooled around her legs and watched the clouds skirl up from the horizon. Before long, she began to sense something unusual happening. Ozone filled the air; she looked at me strangely. "Indian," she said, "shouldn't we get under cover?"

I shook my head. "It can't hurt us."

It was a special and spectacular storm I conjured for her. Lightning strobed around us. The wind veered and danced. The frontal wave carried a surf of dust and vagrant papers; I made it dance in tiny vortices around us. I became so intent on the course of the weather that I did not see the fear growing in Candy's eyes, did not notice when it blossomed into frank terror.

She knew it was me. There was no confusion. "Indian," she said.

I grinned, intoxicated.

"Stop it," she said.

It caught me off guard. Wasn't she amazed, delighted, impressed? Wasn't this a wonderful trick I could do?

But I looked more closely at her and saw that she was trembling under the wide gray-green meridian of the sky. "Indian," she said rigidly, "stop it. I don't know what you're doing, but stop it *right now!*"

My mouth fell open. The wind died.

There was a brief stillness then, an uneasy silence.

"Whatever this is," she said stiffly — the words etched like ice in the motionless air — "I don't want you to do it again. It scares me. Promise, Indian! I *mean* it."

I wanted to explain to her. In town, I wanted to say, I'm nothing. You know what that's like. But out here it's different. Out here is the big world. And in the big world there is nothing but cold and hot, life and death, wind and water.

Out here we mattered just as much as anybody in town — and just as little. Because this was the big world (Spencer Hokeah had taught me the words), and the big world is where we all live and die.

But it scared her. She was scared of magic, and she was scared of the big world.

"Promise," she said fiercely.

I didn't understand. I wanted only to soothe her. I had frightened her, and I was ashamed.

I promised. I would not talk to the wind. (And the voice of the wind, like the voice of a jilted lover, grew cold and still inside me.)

We had not spoken of it since.

The storm I conjured for Lee Ann was fine. All the summer's pent-up heat rose around us in a thunderhead that occluded all the western stars. Lee Ann had passed out with the bottle cradled in her lap, but it didn't matter. I took a deep and personal pleasure in the wild gymnastics of wind and lightning. I spoke to the storm, and I danced with it. I think, if I had asked, it would have picked me up and flown me over the Travelodge. I spoke the storm's secret name (all storms have names, as all clouds have geographies) and I felt the powerful engine beating at the heart of it, moist air boiling up from the prairie blankness, expanding explosively, shedding its hoarded moisture. There is a tremendous potency, my father once said, in great energies too long contained.

It was my own act of infidelity . . . my own choice of secret lover.

If Lee Ann was aware of what I had done — the breaking of a promise or the conjuring of a storm — she was too drunk to react. The rain washed over her in torrents until at last she blinked her eyes and sat up. "Hey," she said. "It's raining."

I walked her to the motel. It was a good storm, I wanted to say. A storm for Candy. And for Lee Ann, too, in a way — for her unfaithful lover Bobby Angle and her munitions-factory dad and for her sister at Bryn Mawr and her brother at Annapolis. A storm for her fear of failure; because — I wanted to tell her — out here in the big world, we are ultimately all equal.

But she was like Candy: driven by her fears. She wouldn't have understood.

I watched her disappear into the yellow light of the lobby, small and wet and too much alone.

* * *

Candy found me out in the dark hills an hour later.

Maybe she met Lee Ann in Bobby's room; maybe Lee Ann told her where to find me. Or maybe she just knew.

The storm was over. The air was wet and clean with the passing of it. A cool wind followed from the western horizon, and it cut like autumn and it smelled like winter.

I could tell by her face she had been crying.

She didn't say anything for a while. She looked up at the ragged sky and asked in a small voice, "Did you do that?"

"I helped," I said.

She nodded, assimilating this information.

I said, "How'd it go with you and Bobby?"

"Not too good," she said, and her face wrinkled as if she might cry again.

I put an arm around her to comfort her, but she shrugged it away.

"I did what he wanted, Indian. Shouldn't that count for something?"

"Everything," I said quietly.

"I did what he wanted. And then we were lying there in his room." She hid her face from me. "I asked him if he would take me away with him. You know what he said? He said, 'Get real.'" Her voice was plaintive, pained. "Get real! What kind of shitty thing is that to say to a person?"

I said I didn't know.

She turned toward me, hugging herself. "You can still do it, can't you? The thing with the wind."

I nodded.

"I think I envy you, Indian. You like it out here, right? You can live out here. But I can't. I need the town. I need people to like me."

She needed glamour, which was what Bobby had to offer. I did not say what I thought: that glamour is an illusion, and that everybody touched by it — Candy, Bobby, Lee Ann — is doomed to play the role of an extra.

Her expression hardened. "Don't you tell anybody about this, Indian! Don't *ever* tell anybody."

"I won't," I said. "I promise."

It was the last promise we would make each other.

She turned to leave. As she walked away, I saw something flutter through the air behind her.

It was the tattered rag of Lee Ann's lost peignoir, torn by the elements and by the storm. The storm had battered it down to a pale fragment of itself; Candy did not even look up as the vagrant wind swirled it past her.

The movie people pulled out on schedule, one week into September. Candy came out to the Texaco to watch their Winnebagos winding away, but we did not speak.

In '85 she married a local guy named Tom Harlow. Tom runs the hardware store in Clapham. The store was bought out by a chain, but Tom stayed on to manage, so they do all right. I see them sometimes out at the station.

Everybody still remembers her as the girl who dated Bobby Angle. She encourages it. Nothing overt, but she smiles and tilts her head. She is, by local standards, very much a celebrity.

I hope it is enough for her. She seems happy. I saw her with Tom when *High School Confidential* premiered at the Rialto; she was laughing at some joke of his. But it seemed to me there was a note of hysteria in the laughter.

As for me — I hope to have the trailer paid off soon. Then, who knows? Sky's the limit.

And of course the wind still blows through here.

Still it speaks. It whispers. You are special, it says. You are special, this place is special; you are immortal, you have lived forever, you will live forever.

I call down fogs in autumn, ice storms in the bitter bleak of winter. I dance with dust devils and dry summer thermals. I stand beneath the stars and gaze at the stars, and the wind whispers the secret names of the stars.

And I grieve sometimes for Candy — and for Lee Ann, and even for Bobby — whose hearts were needlessly broken, and who loved something much more fickle than the wind.





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MOSCOW 2042, Vladimir Voinovich (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, cloth, 424 pp, \$16.95)

Science fiction has many fathers (few of them willing to legitimize their offspring, alas). One of the proudest of them is the tradition of extravagant social satire. Long before there was such a thing as science fiction, Thomas More and Jonathan Swift and many others set their ruthless, truthful satires in futures or faraway lands or alternate histories; today it is almost impossible to write that kind of satire without it belonging, to some degree, within the realm of science fiction. Ours may be a bastard genre, but we do have firm possession of our turf.

In *Moscow 2042*, Vladimir Voinovich takes on all of contemporary Russian society with no less bravura than Swift. An emigre himself, Voinovich obviously has painful truths to tell about life in the Soviet Union and the contradictions within it. Yet, like any true satirist, he

remains at heart a member of the community whose correction he calls for. He is a Russian, writing to and about Russians; it is our privilege to overhear his witty, funny, dead-on story. A science fiction story, I hasten to add.

The narrator, Vitaly Nikitich, is a Russian emigre writer of novels who happens to take a trip into the future — he books passage on a time-travel airplane that takes him to Moscow in 2042, where he finds that he is the hero of the Communist utopia. As we might expect, things aren't all they seem to be; but then, Voinovich isn't trying to surprise us with the news that Communism is sustained by repression and hypocrisy. What makes this book funny and true is the way human beings adapt to live within the system, all pretending to each other that it works.

Nor does Voinovich spare those on this side of the Iron Curtain. In particular, he snipes at Solzhenitsyn through the character Sim Simych, an arrogant exiled Russian who is more czarist than democrat.

Yet Sim Simych turns out to have a kind of magnificence in his folly. As does Voinovich.

And, just as Voinovich carefully denies that Simych is Solzhenitsyn by referring to Solzhenitsyn himself within the book, he also denies that this book is science fiction. He is deliberately misleading us. He uses all the tools of science fiction — uses them well — so that when he deliberately wraps up his characters in time-travel paradoxes, one gets the feeling that he sins, not through ignorance, but by delicious design.

Action-adventure this is not. Wonderful satirical SF it is, in the tradition of Swift — and Pohl & Kornbluth.

Strange Toys, Patricia Geary (Bantam Spectra, paper, 248 pp, \$3.50)

I don't regard it as a requirement that horror stories shock me or make me throw up; usually, I'd rather they didn't. What I ask of horror is that it fill me with anxiety and dread, then resolve my tension by the end of tale.

Unfortunately, because shocking people and grossing them out are easy, there are far more storytellers who achieve those effects than there are who manage the subtleties of character and language and event that create the general anxiety and

the deep and unforgettable dread that mark the true masters of the genre.

Now, if you're perfectly happy with the screwdriver-through-the-eyeball school of horror writing, ignore this review. Patricia Geary is not for you. (Harlan Ellison's September column took care of your arcane needs, anyway.)

But if, like me, you long for stories that make you deeply uneasy, not because of some dim fog of evil or some gross nightmare monster but rather because of the power of real people to hurt and disturb each other, then have I got a book for you.

Patricia Geary's *Strange Toys* is about a girl named Pet and her relationship with her fat sister June (who always calls *her* fat), their elaborate imaginary life with their toys, and the equally imaginary life of their odd parents, Stan and Linwood. It is not, however, the eccentricities of these people that won me over — it is their absolute believability.

Most important to the book, though she barely appears in it, is Pet's dangerous oldest sister Deane, who has created a life of dark magic that now, in her absence, works powerfully in Pet's life. Eventually it sucks the whole family out of their home and puts them on a long journey without any destination

they might have hoped for. Pet uses the journey as an attempt to master the same forces Deane has learned to use; she finds that she expected too much of them, yet also never learned to believe in them enough.

You will love these people; they will break your heart. And if Geary seems uncertain at the end of the novel what the whole thing was about after all; if she seems unwilling to tell us plainly *what happened* in the final scenes; well, I say let's forgive her for that — she is writer-in-residence in an English department, after all, so she can't come out and just tell us what happened, can she? If just *anybody* can understand a book, it can't be art, right?

Strange Toys is good enough along the way that we can forgive the frayed ending and hope that in future books she will carry her clear and quirky vision right through to the end.

Aegypt, John Crowley (Bantam Spectra, cloth, 390 pp, \$22.95)

I read John Crowley's *The Deep* in 1977, I think. I'd never heard of him; there was a quote on the cover from LeGuin or Ellison that drew me to pick it up and buy it. It was a marvelous, difficult, strange fantasy novel that seemed to have a linear thread that kept getting lost. I learned more about the possibili-

ties of writing from that book than from any other science fiction book I've ever read. Then, not many years later, his third novel, *Engine Summer*, became what is, in my mind, one of the great novels of science fiction. Never mind that it never won a Hugo or Nebula — I have it on good authority that those awards only go to "sci-fi" writers these days anyway. Crowley is simply a brilliant original. Even spectacularly boring books like *Little, Big* don't diminish my admiration for him — even in failure he towers over many lesser writers.

His latest novel, *Aegypt*, is a spectacular success — precisely because, by any standard definition, it's a lousy novel. That is, it doesn't have a beginning and middle and end. It follows several plot threads at once, all of them interesting, but all of them eventually left untied, never fully resolved. It's as if the book goes around in circles, and sometime during the ride, the author hops off the merry-go-round and says, "There. That's what it was all about."

And that *is* what *Aegypt* is all about. Another way of looking at history, at time, at human life. The idea of circular journeys that we insist, in our modern arrogance, on seeing as linear journeys. Life is a cycle of circles of wheels, working an intricate Ptolemaic pattern across

the sky, say the characters in *Aegypt*, and Crowley proceeds to write a novel that exactly mirrors what the characters believe.

In short, Crowley seriously proposes (or almost seriously — it is fiction, after all) that much, perhaps most of human history is completely out of the reach of our linear methods of storytelling — and then proves his case by producing a story that is a genuine artifact of his magical *Aegypt*.

I know, I haven't told you a thing about the story. I'm not going to, either. I'm just going to tell you that this is fiction of ideas in the best sense — the characters are people to whom ideas and understanding matter, who have thoughts and conversations worth hearing, and who move through lives that seem ordinary and yet touch on deep strangeness at many surprising points. Crowley has seen the possibilities of science fiction and used them to create a world we haven't seen before. I urge you to live in that world for a while. It is the only world in which this sentence from the end of the book is not a tautology:

"Continuously, unnoticeably, at the rate of one second per second, the world turned from what it had been and into what it was to be."

Isaac Asimov's Robot City: Book 1: Odyssey, Michael P. Kube-McDowell

(Ace, paper, 211 pp, \$2.95)

There seems to be a spate of books these days in which young writers set aside some of their own imagination and write novels set in the fictional universe of a much more famous author. The theory is, I suppose, that the young writers thereby reach readers who otherwise would never hear of them. Not only that, but the value of the Famous Author's name as a commercial commodity can bring in a few more bucks without him having to write a few more books.

Everybody gets paid, nobody loses, so what's the harm? You could even call it a kind of literary surrogate motherhood.

You could also call it the literary equivalent of statutory rape. But since so many people are doing it, it's got to be OK, right?

Harold Robbins has his line of "Harold Robbins presents" books. A friend of mine wrote a couple of them. They paid him good money. More than I got for my first few novels. At that point in my career, would I have said no? Maybe. Maybe not. But, besides the cash, it wasn't any help to his career. He's got a terrific, original mainstream book with excellent commercial potential that still goes begging after several years. And the money he got for the Robbins books is long gone.

Now it's happening in science fiction, too. For instance, Tor books is bringing out their "Crossroads Adventure" series, with Jody Lynn Nye's *Dragonharper* "in the world of Anne McCaffrey's *Pern*," Matt Costello's *Revolt on Majipoor* "in the world of Robert Silverberg's *Majipoor*," and Neil Randall's *Storm of Dust* "in the world of David Drake's *Dragon Lord*."

Maybe they're wonderful books. Maybe you'll love them and be grateful that the combination of intellects produced such marvelous literature. But I don't want to read them.

I never wanted to read Robert Heinlein's *Lensman* novel, either. Fortunately, he never wrote it. Instead, he wrote *Tunnel in the Sky* and "All You Zombies." Maybe he could have made more money writing Doc Smith's novels back then. But thank God he wrote Robert Heinlein's novels instead. Because if Robert Heinlein hadn't written them, nobody else would ever have written them, either. The time these young writers spend writing somebody else's books is time they don't spend writing their own.

So I cringed when I saw Michael P. Kube-McDowell's name on another loaned-world novel, the first book of *Isaac Asimov's Robot City*. What is the author of *Emprise* and *Empery* doing renting out his talent?

For that matter, what is the author of *Foundation* and "Robot Dreams" doing renting out his name and his world?

With horrid fascination I opened the book and started to read. I expected to hate the book. I *wanted* to hate it.

Dammit, folks, I couldn't. It was a good read. I have to be honest — Kube-McDowell can write, and the story held me all the way.

So — talent wins the joust with cynical hackery?

No, not quite. There are at least three plot-holes that kill the plausibility of the book:

1. One character goes six weeks without food, eats one big meal, and then walks around like nothing happened.

2. Aliens who have met almost no humans for some reason adopted human "Standard" as their ship-board patois.

3. And the biggest dumbness of all: The main character keeps getting to the verge of a decisive scene, and then suddenly we skip to the next chapter where he's just waking up and has to go around trying to find out what happened while he was asleep. *Three times*, folks.

Kube-McDowell makes a one-sentence stab at dismissing all these problems, but that doesn't even come close to solving them. I can't help but think that if Kube-

McDowell were writing a book that was truly his own, he wouldn't let such gaping idiocies get past him. Certainly if Asimov thought of the book as his, he'd never settle for this. But in fact neither of them has invested his soul in the book, and it shows. Not in *bad* writing, but in carelessness.

Yet. Despite all my distaste for the whole enterprise, despite the obvious, painful flaws, despite the pointless illustrations at the end of the book, despite the infuriating wait-for-the-sequel ending: I couldn't put it down. It held me. It may have made me stupider in the process, but I read it from cover to cover and enjoyed it until I started thinking again. If that's a recommendation, go for it.

In case the writing bug has bit you, you might enjoy Janet and Isaac Asimov's *How to Enjoy Writing* (Walker, cloth, 155 pp, \$15.95). An unpretentious combination of Janet and Isaac Asimov's essays and the words of other writers on the writing life, this is exactly the sort of relaxed, charming book you'd expect from the dedication: "To the versatile English language — the best tool a writer ever had."

...



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The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars,
Stephen Brust (Ace, cloth, 210 pp,
\$16.95)

This novel is beautifully packaged — a small hardcover, with one of Tom Canty's loveliest fantasy women gracefully framed on the jacket. And the book's heading promises this is the first in "A Series of Fantasy Novels Retelling Classic Tales." Since Brust is one of our foremost young fantasists, I came to this book expecting a superb novelization of a classic fairy tale.

So at first I was disappointed —

even annoyed. The fairy tale is retold only in fragments, as the second to last section of each chapter. Most of the book is instead a story of a group of contemporary artists working together in a studio whose future, after three years, is now in jeopardy. I cringed as Brust seemed to be heading toward the same kind of "sensitive artist" hogwash that has long been the mass delusion of the artsy-fartsy literary set. I almost didn't go on to chapter two.

But I did go on. And while there is perhaps more angst and self-examination than I normally believe in or care about in fiction, the contemporary story held up rather well — it was worth reading, and while I never found any direct connection between the fairy tale and the contemporary story, the juxtaposition was emo-

tionally effective, as both stories clarified into tales about loyalty.

What I enjoyed most, though, was Brust's ruminations on art. Far from the "we artists are a rare and delicate breed" attitude I had feared, Brust took a practical look at what art is for and how it works. I found his ideas illuminating, his characters believable and likeable, and the fairy tale well-told. But since his mini-essays on art are perhaps the strongest part of the book, if that particular topic is not interesting to you, you may not care for this volume.

In any event, I still look forward to future installments of this series, in the hope that they actually will be "novels retelling classic tales."

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SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

Larry Tritten writes: "We have two black cats, Calliope and Nibs, and the latter one is always curling up on the cable box on top of the TV, where he frequently changes the channels by pressing different buttons when he moves — so this one was inspired by him." It concerns a TV show that tells the truth, which you'd think would have great appeal. You would be wrong.

In Video Veritas

By Larry Tritten

ALTHOUGH HE LIKED to point out to visitors that he got all of the channels — over thirty-five of them — Kapinsky had never really thought about Channel 1 until the night when his cat, Eyesore, jumped up on the cable box on top of the TV set. Kapinsky had been watching *The Terror of Tiny Town*, a Western with an all-midget cast, and Eyesore stepped on several of the buttons on the cable box, which changed the channel several times in rapid succession, creating a montage of fleeting images — a housewife serving her family heaping bowls of something that looked like bog soil; a hypnotist-evangelist putting an old woman into a trance by swinging a crucifix on a chain back forth before her eyes; a eyes; a naked teenage girl dancing convulsively with her partner, who couldn't see the ax sticking in her back; a comedian smashing a watermelon with a sledgehammer; a painting by Modigliani; a foodfight in a sushi bar — that culminated on imageless Channel 1.

"Hey, creep," Kapinsky yelled, and threw a .22-caliber bullet at the cat.

It was one of a handful of bullets that Kapinsky liked to roll around in his hand while watching TV. The bullet missed Eyesore, but the cat, annoyed, jumped back down to the floor and ran out of the room.

The illuminated red number on the cable box was 1, and the screen of the television set was blank, as if it hadn't been turned on. There wasn't even the characteristic snow one found on the other inoperable channels.

Kapinsky reached for the remote-control device and was about to change the channel back to where it had been, when a picture abruptly appeared on Channel 1. He was startled by its clarity, which was like that of sharply focused film rather than television. A man who was apparently a talk show host sat behind a desk in front of a wall decorated with a painted logo of the traditional comedy and tragedy masks entwined with a banner that read *In Video Veritas*. The man was as avuncular-looking as Walter Cronkite. There were no guests in the three chairs across from him, and he seemed about to doze off, but suddenly snapped out of his lassitude and turned to look at Kapinsky, who had the extraordinary feeling that he really was being looked at by the man personally and directly.

"Do you want to know the truth?" the man asked, smiling humorlessly.

"Fuck, yeah," said Kapinsky, who considered himself as eager to know the truth as Diogenes had been to find an honest man. Kapinsky played chains and shackles for a punk band called Crib Death, and he wrote most of their songs, which tended to be about either sex without love or love unrequited by sex or the hypocrisy of the modern world, which ignores or hides from the truth.

"The truth is a very potent commodity," the man said, narrowing his eyes in a way that reminded Kapinsky of Jack Palance in *Shane*. "It's been said that the truth will set you free, but it can as well put you into bondage. The truth can hurt."

"Your mother's perineum," Kapinsky said, and absentmindedly popped a bullet into his mouth, forgetting that they weren't candies, because he was on LSD, which he had taken earlier in response to a rejection letter received from a New Wave literary magazine, *Logorrhea*, to which he had sent a number of poems.

The host had stopped talking and was looking at Kapinsky, or *seemed* to be looking at him, Kapinsky thought. He was staring straightforwardly

from the television screen with a placid but thoughtful expression.

"Weirdopolis," Kapinsky muttered, and tossed a bullet at the set.

To his amazement, the host winced slightly. "What are those, candies you're eating . . . ?" he asked.

"These aren't candies, bozo," Kapinsky said. "They're dead horseflies."

"Red hots? French burnt peanuts?" asked the host. He paused. "No? Is it bridge mix? You know what I used to like? Those candy valentine hearts with phrases on them." He frowned. "We've got them here, but they have disturbing little naked facts on them — you know, 'Your dog eats vomit,' 'John Wayne was 4-F,' 'miss America owns a vibrator' . . . that sort of thing."

"Jesus, this is some stuff," Kapinsky said of the LSD. He had never had such a coherent and palpable hallucination as this. It was like a lucid dream. It sure as hell topped the more familiar reactions, such as seeing his hands turn into jewels as he concentrated on all the little faceted lines on his flesh or seeing colors glow with a heightened intensity.

"About the truth, then," the host said, smiling at Kapinsky. "Are you sure you want to know the truth?"

"Hey," Kapinsky called out challengingly. "Any day, anytime." He began to hum the energizing "Getting Stronger" number that accompanied the training sequences in *Rocky*.

"Well, I guess you do," the host said, pleased. "Good . . . O.K." He smiled faintly. "Now, the truth is that the truth is like an iceberg. Most of us sail through our lives with the truth way off the port bow somewhere, and when we do see it, we just see the tip of the iceberg and not the three-fourths of it that remains submerged. And, of course, the cold, hard facts of the truth can rip your psyche open and sink you in a slough of despair. You remember the *Titanic*."

"Yeah," Kapinsky said, remembering the stories he had heard about men in drag who had gotten in the lifeboats with the women and children, who had been dispatched first as per tradition.

"Also," the host said, "the truth is rationed somewhat. We treat it the way the government did gasoline and sugar during the war. I'll give you some today, some more the next time . . . if you can find me again, which is iffy. You can't just tune me in. Reception is unpredictable. The truth is elusive."

Kapinsky looked around the room, marveling at the resonance of the hallucination. Everything around him was terrifically clear and bright, the

colors vibrant, and the image of the man on the television screen seemed virtually three dimensional, his blue suit giving off an undertone of dusky effulgence as if the fabric were woven of subdued light, the carnation in his lapel a radiant cerise, the water glass on his desk gleaming like a polished diamond.

"What kind of truth interests you?" the host asked, folding his hands on the desk. "Historical, personal, universal . . . ?"

"Hey, I want it all," Kapinsky said. "Lay it on me, dad."

"As I said," the host went on, "it's available only in increments. For starters, you'll have to choose one of those categories. I'll repeat them, and you tell me which one you want. . . . All right, then . . . historical. . . ."

"Nah," Kapinsky said.

"Personal. . . ."

"Bingo!" Kapinsky exclaimed. He threw a bullet at the television screen.

"All right," the host said. He paused and gave Kapinsky a smile that gave him the impression of being apologetic. "Now. Whom do you want to know the truth about? There's your girlfriend, Galatea. The band members. Your mom. . . ."

The bouncer, Kapinsky thought. That was the nickname he had given his mother in high school and which he had used to refer to her ever since. His relationship with his mother had always been dispassionate at best, bitterly antipathetic at worse. He figured he already knew the truth about her, that she was tyrannical and narrow-minded. He had always disliked her as much as he had loved his father. Kapinsky's childhood had been considerably unhappy. Girls hadn't like him, and his friends had tended to be troublesome types who were continually being sent to institutions. The only things he had really cared about were his father and his parrot, both of whom he had loved.

"How about your dad?" the host asked.

"I know about him," Kapinsky said.

"Maybe not everything," the host suggested.

"O.K., fuck you," Kapinsky said. "Enlighten me."

The image on the television screen disappeared and was replaced by twisted shapes of color like those on a pay channel whose signal is unscrambled. Then the shifting twists of color dissolved slowly into a fuzzy black-and-white image. It was Kapinsky's room from his high school days.

He leaned forward, staring in dismay. There was his dresser with the driftwood lamp with the apple-green shade on it and a number of other things he remembered instantly: the brace of .50-caliber machine-gun bullets standing upright; his fishing knife with the serrated blade and his swimming goggles; some copies of *Mad*; the box with his arrowheads in it; a handful of felt emblems that his mother would later grudgingly sew onto a jacket for him — a winged skull and crossbones, a Marine Corps globe and anchor, a Trojan warrior, a bulldog's head; a couple of books of exploding matches; his midget deck of playing cards. Seeing these things, he remembered some of the other things in the dresser: the Vietnamese ear in a jar of preserving fluid that had been sent to him by a friend who had graduated from high school a year before him and gone to Vietnam (he had told his mother cryptically that it was a "biology project," and she had never pursued the matter); the copies of Swedish porn magazines — *Color Climax*, *Ouil Ouil*, and *No! No!* — taped to the top of the top drawer, and the prophylactics hidden beneath his copies of *Rolling Stone*.

Slowly the dresser receded on the television screen, and the view of the room became more expansive. Kapinsky saw the posters of Frank Zappa, Jim Morrison, and Godzilla on the wall; and in one corner, on a tall bench Kapinsky had made in Wood Shop in high school, stood Mr. Malice's cage, the top open, Mr. Malice standing motionless on his perch.

"Mr. Malice," Kapinsky whispered. And the vision was so affecting that for a moment he thought that he had seen Mr. Malice's eye gleam momentarily with recognition at the sound of his name. Watching the bird, Kapinsky felt a sudden whelming sensation of sadness as he remembered the day Mr. Malice had died, how he had taken the cold body from the cage, tears flooding unashamedly from his eyes, and wrapped it carefully in soft green felt that he bought at the dime store, and buried it in a shoe box near a rose bush in the backyard.

Kapinsky's dad walked into his room. "Jesus, Dad," Kapinsky murmured. "This is weird. . . ."

As Kapinsky watched, his dad went over to Mr. Malice's cage. "Hey, asshole," he said to the bird.

Kapinsky sat up, staring at the picture.

"Asshole," his father repeated. He picked up a plastic ruler and jabbed it at the bird, which scurried fearfully sideways along the perch, its zygodactyl feet clinging firmly as the perch rocked back and forth.

Kapinsky sighed queasily. Devious acid, he thought. A pleasant trip suddenly mutating.

"You loudmouthed son of a bitch," Kapinsky's dad said to the bird. "Can you ever shut up?"

"Elroy," Kapinsky heard his mother's voice say irritably from another room, "if the goddamned bird disturbs you, *why don't you just talk to Malcolm about it!*"

"Does the son of a bitch have to scream so much?" Kapinsky's dad replied, glaring at the parrot. He made a malicious feint with the ruler, and the bird tilted sideways in terror.

"Why don't you just talk to Malcolm about it?" his mother's voice persisted.

His dad said nothing. He put down the ruler and made simulated claws with his hands, the fingers arched, assuming a monstrous stance, and towered over the open cage, feinting repeatedly, the frightened parrot ducking this way and that on the swaying perch.

Kapinsky closed his eyes for a moment, thinking that when he opened them, the ugly vision would have passed; but when he did, his dad still stood there, a bully incarnate. Kapinsky remembered how Mr. Malice had periodically let out strident shrieks, but his father had never complained about it, and he had actually enjoyed the sound.

A moment later, Kapinsky found himself watching the host again, who was smiling at him. "A little minim of truth for you to mull over," he said. "Would you like more? Or would you rather not confront it?"

"I kiss the truth on the lips," Kapinsky said. "The *real* truth."

"That was real."

"No, it wasn't my dad. Sorry, buddy."

"Well, here's a little more," said the host.

The picture on the television screen wavered, disappeared, and was replaced by another one that showed Kapinsky himself, as a boy, walking into the living room of his house, where his dad sat reading the newspaper. Kapinsky had a strong feeling of *déjà vu*. He saw that he was wearing the black felt derby that he had bought at a carnival the year he was eleven and worn with fetishistic loyalty all that summer and fall. His expression was sulky and angry, and he was carrying a catcher's mitt with a baseball in its palm. Looking at him over his newspaper, his dad asked him what was wrong.

"Oh, we were playing ball in front of The Mope's house, and he came out and said if we didn't go someplace else, he'd call the cops," Kapinsky said in the distraught voice of a victimized innocent.

For a moment his dad considered the complaint, and then, with a growing smile of delicious anticipation, he crumpled the pages of the newspaper together in a melodramatic gesture and stood up slowly. "O.K., he's been begging for it, and he's going to get it," he said in a voice filled with ominous resolve.

Kapinsky stared at the picture, rapt. He was seeing a pictorial incarnation of one of his finest memories of his dad — the day he had straightened out The Mope. The Mope was the name he and Dad had given to a reclusive bachelor who lived alone in a small house in the middle of their block. Sometimes Kapinsky and a friend played ball in the street in front of his house, and The Mope invariably came out to ask them if they would please play somewhere else because they could easily break a window. On the particular day, The Mope had finally lost his temper and shouted at them, threatening to call the police. Kapinsky's dad had gone over to talk to the man, had gone inside the house, and had returned looking slightly disheveled and red-faced. When Kapinsky has asked what happened, he had said mysteriously, "I got a little carried away. . . . He won't give you any more trouble," and after a few moments added judiciously, "You know, you ought to use the diamond from now on. I don't want the guy dying of heart failure. . . ."

Now Kapinsky was seeing his dad leave the house and cross the street toward The Mope's place, just as he had on that fall afternoon years ago. He saw his dad knock on the door, say something to The Mope when he answered it, and then move aggressively inside.

"O.K., what the hell is your problem, smartass?" Kapinsky's dad said toughly as he stepped into The Mope's living room, the screen door slamming behind him.

"Look, Kapinsky, I'm trying to be reasonable," The Mope said in a weary voice. He backed away from Kapinsky's dad, who stepped challengingly forward. "Those kids could break a window. I sit in here and watch TV. It's dangerous. All I ask is that—"

"And all I ask, dumb fuck," Kapinsky's dad intervened in a lethal tone, "is that you *take it easy, buddy*," and he emphasized the last words by jabbing his forefinger against the man's chest, once for each word, with increasing force.

The Mope moved swiftly and with absolute efficiency, deftly moving past Kapinsky's dad to fold his arm up behind his back and slam his body against the wall. He was shorter than Kapinsky's dad, and perhaps fifteen years older, but when Kapinsky's dad struggled to free himself, The Mope twisted his arm so hard, and banged his head once against the wall, that he cried out in pain. "Uncle," The Mope said. "Say uncle, Kapinsky."

Kapinsky's dad heaved against the man's restraint, but to no avail, and within seconds his expression had become agonized, and he was whimpering in extreme pain, transfixed and helpless. "Uncle, uncle, oh Jesus," he gasped. "Owwwwwww. . . owww. . ."

"Say aunt, auntie," The Mope instructed him in a quiet voice, and wrenched his arm fiercely.

Kapinsky's dad sobbed, "Aunt, auntie, ohhhhhhh, owww, God, leggo. . ."

"I'm going to release you now, Mr. Kapinsky," The Mope said, "and if you want to fight, *be good*, because. . ." And he concluded by rising on his toes so he could whisper the final words directly into Kapinsky's dad's ear: ". . . I will kill you, tough guy." Standing back, he released Kapinsky's dad and stood firmly before him, with one fist cocked, and smiling so intensely that Kapinsky's dad merely cringed against the wall, his features blurred with pain and fear.

"Sayonara," said The Mope.

The picture on the screen vacillated again for a few seconds, then the host returned. "The truth," he said. "Uncosmeticized by predilection or desire. Brass tacks. Irreducible and stubborn facts, in the words of James."

"James who?" asked Kapinsky. The hallucinatory binge had brought him near the edge of depression, but he knew from experience that he could cope with it by reminding himself that he was on a drug and deciding to get the upper hand. I'm on LSD, he told himself, I'm on LSD. Hey, I'm booked for this gig, Mr. Drug; why don't you go play somewhere else?"

"Would you care for even deeper truth?" the host asked him.

"Let me check the guide here first and see what else is on," Kapinsky said, reaching for the newspaper's weekly television magazine on the coffee table.

"There's an interesting panel discussion on veterinarians addicted to animal tranquilizers on the public access channel," the host said. "Why don't you look for me another time, when you aren't on a drug?"

"Good idea," Kapinsky agreed. He picked up the remote control, pressed a couple of numbers arbitrarily, and exchanged the picture of the host for one of a caribou stumbling in a snowdrift.

THE NEXT morning, Kapinsky remembered his session with Channel 1 the same way one remembers an unpleasant dream, with a mixture of distaste and surprise that one is capable of such perverse imaginings. The LSD had left him wrung out, and he decided to skip a rehearsal the band had scheduled that afternoon and idle around the apartment, drinking coffee, reading magazines, and maybe working on a song or two that had been gestating in his brain. To his displeasure, he found that unsettling images of the night before kept distracting him. He went to the television set and switched it on, tuning in the cable box to Channel 1. Dead air. On an impulse, he called an acquaintance of his, Ziggy Immelman, who was a Couch Potato. The Couch Potatoes were cultists who watched television ritualistically, sometimes several sets simultaneously, in a regimen their official handbook described as Transcendental Vegetation. The cult had begun in California, but now had members all over the world.

"Ziggy," Kapinsky said. "Something I wonder if you can tell me. . . ." Why isn't there a Channel 1 — I mean, why isn't it ever used by anybody?"

"Oh, that's the military channel," Ziggy said. "Sometime back after World War II, the FCC took that channel and gave it to the military. I guess it belongs to them."

"The military," Kapinsky said. "And nobody else uses it?"

"I don't think it's ever been used, no."

"Hmmm . . . O.K., thanks, Zig."

"Yeah."

During the next few days, Kapinsky's mind was intermittently nagged by his LSD hallucination, which had been so realistic that the memory of it irritably persisted. Every once in a while, he would sidle up to the television set and turn on Channel 1, doing it abstractedly, virtually unthinkingly, because he refused to analyze why he did it, but the habit was irresistible, like picking at a scab. There was, or course, only the blank screen when he did it.

On Saturday afternoon, Galatea called him to cancel their date for that night, saying that she had the flu. Kapinsky, who had counted on having

her in his bed by eight o'clock, was instead alone and watching television at that time. He watched wrestling for a while, tired quickly of its histrionic bombast, and reached for the schedule. He couldn't find anything that interested him, and decided to watch MTV for a while. As he was about to change the channel with the remote control, he decided on a whim to check Channel 1. The talk show host was there, smiling at him.

"You aren't on drugs this time," he said.

"Goddamn," Kapinsky swore softly.

"Would you like another serving of the truth?"

An acid flashback? Kapinsky wondered. But he felt completely clear-minded and sober, and as he looked around at his surroundings, there was no doubt in his mind that his natural perceptions were unaffected by anything.

"I told you, I embrace the truth," Kapinsky said defiantly, but even as he spoke, the pictures of his dad from the other night came back to him, and he felt a sudden wave of doubt, aggravation, anger, and confusion.

"More personal truth?" the host suggested. "About . . . your girl, perhaps?"

Kapinsky felt a subtle, visceral chill as he heard himself say, "Sure, why not?"

Galatea appeared on the television screen. She was at a table in a coffee shop with her girlfriend Dusty, who was saying, "...sooner or later, Galatea. If they didn't know each other, and work together, maybe you could pull it off, but it's going to be tough."

"Yeah, I know," Galatea said.

"Well, isn't life interesting?"

"Sure is," Galatea said, taking a sip of coffee.

"So who's the better lay?" Dusty asked with a good-natured leer.

Galatea sighed, avoiding Dusty's gaze.

"So who? Who knocks over more milk cans in the lavender dairy?"

Galatea looked troubled, then said, unhesitantly, "Tony. I can't deny it. He's more adventurous. He's *wild*. Mal just doesn't have that kind of imagination."

"Such as?"

Galatea smiled now, a libidinal gleam brightening her eyes. "One night I left my door open for him and was waiting in bed, with my sleep mask on, listening to *Brown Lunch* on my Walkman, and Tony came in — we

had this all set up in advance — he had a couple of *ben-wa* balls and a handful of marshmallows, and he said—

"Hey!" Kapinsky cried, bolting to his feet and standing there as if frozen into immobility. Tony? Tony!? Tony Cazzara was Crib Death's jack-hammer operator. His mind whirled. Galatea disappeared on the television screen, and the host was back.

"Was that a shock?" he asked.

"Are you telling me that . . . ?" Kapinsky began in a rage, but the sentence dwindled as a sense of psychological nausea overpowered him, and he slumped back onto the couch, speechless.

"I don't make the truth; I only disseminate it," the host said.

Kapinsky left the room, went into the kitchen, and looked for a beer in the refrigerator. There were none. He stood in front of the refrigerator, trying to shut the thoughts of his dad and Galatea out of his mind. Anger propelled him back into the living room to stand before the television set.

"If you don't like the truth, I'm sorry, but I can't refund your credulity," the host said. "But now that you've reached the first plateau, so to speak, I can offer you even more revealing personal truths . . . or you can try another category, of course."

"Another category?" Kapinsky asked, grimacing.

"I recommend the universal truths," the host said. He smiled. "These are the big ones, Kapinsky. It takes incredible courage to accept these answers, but we have them, all of them, all of the answers to the questions that have concerned philosophers since the beginning of thought. Is there a Supreme Being? Are events predestined? Is reality mental or physical? Is causality valid? Is there life on other worlds?" He paused for effect before concluding: ". . . Is there life after death?" And then added: "Do you care to know any of these things?"

"I want to know it all," Kapinsky said in furious defiance, restraining himself from kicking the television set over.

The host showed surprise. "Well. Perhaps you should reconsider. Are you sure you want to know such things?"

"Yeah," Kapinsky said. "*Fuckin' yeah.*"

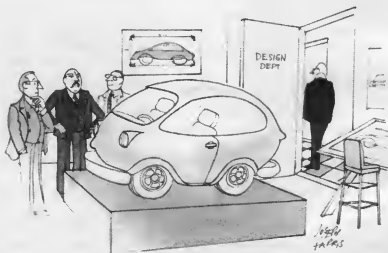
Kapinsky paced around the room, his fists clenched, and sat down on the couch again. "Yeah," he said.

"Do you want to know if there is life after death?"

"Yeah."

At that moment, Eyesore walked into the room. Seeking the warmth of the cable box, he jumped nimbly up onto the television set, then curled up placidly on the cable box, unaware of the picture on the screen and paying no attention to the host's words as he said, "Well, that's one more for us, Kapinsky. We'll put your name on the wall here along with the others. We got the idea, incidentally, from the Vietnam memorial in Washington, D.C. We don't have many names yet, but give us time. . . ."

The picture on the screen vanished. A minute or so passed, and Eyesore, eyes closed, rearranged his posture slightly, one leg brushing the number panel of the cable box, creating a flickering series of images on the television screen. As Eyesore settled down and stopped moving, Channel 28, Home Box Office, clicked on, and the picture on the screen showed a top-heavy teenage girl in a two-piece polka-dot bikini standing on a beach. She removed the bottom of the bikini, and then its top, releasing voluptuous breasts that swayed as she walked toward the surf, a sight that Kapinsky normally would have been entranced by, but now, as the surf curled around the girl's feet, breaking in white crests over her ankles, he saw nothing.



"It's original but something about it bothers me."

This colorful tale of magic and terror in the French Quarter of New Orleans is Roger Lovin's first for F&SF. Mr. Lovin is in his mid forties, lives in Louisiana and is a former newspaperman: publisher of the south's first alternate newspaper, The Word, writer for the Los Angeles Free Press, Los Angeles Times, the New Orleans Times Picayune, and the New York Times. He has published several books, including THE COMPLETE MOTORCYCLE NOMAD.

The Cobbler

By Roger Robert Lovin

ACHONDROPLASIA," SAID LEBOEUF, doling out the word syllable by syllable like a particularly droll gift.

I accepted it with all possible disdain, as though it were so common to my lexicon that I was embarrassed for his paucity of invention. LeBoeuf and I expected this of each other. It was as much a part of the game as not looking 'round. We were acknowledged Masters and must needs set ourselves burdens beyond the abilities of the merely mortal, and display requisite ennui in the exhibition of our skills.

For example: the less-gifted played from the patio, from tables within the Café du Monde's wrought-iron surround. This gave both players equal and simultaneous views of Jackson Square, the heart of the Vieux Carré, New Orleans's lovely, exquisitely decadent old French Quarter. But LeBoeuf and I played from a table on the banquette, the sidewalk outside the surround, and we sat in such fashion that one would have an exclusive view up Rue Decatur, toward Esplanade and the Old Mint, while the other

looked down the street toward Jackson Brewery and the American Quarter across Canal. This permitted whoever started the game — as, in this instance, LeBoeuf had just done — to remark an Object of Interest not yet within the second player's sight, thus making his task the more difficult. Additionally (and I confess, to no more worthy end than increasing our stature among our confreres, a group frequently confounded anyway by the erudition and obtusity of our clues and responses), we'd adopted the small arrogance of working from peripheral vision to the extent possible. We played in rarefied ether, LeBoeuf and I, as befit the Authors of the game.

The game is this. First player surveys the potpourri of late-afternoon traffic promenading Jackson Square in search of an Object of Interest: animal, vegetable, mineral, or tourist. A suitable Object located, he marks its salients and situation, studying it judiciously until wit, intellect, and Machiavellian bent suggest a suitably oblique one-word clue to the Object's identity. He then presents this word to second player.

Second player, with minimal direct observation, maximal insouciance, and full awareness of his partner's devious nature, studies the *mise-en-scène*. It is his task to locate the Object of Interest and to then produce a one-word response that proves beyond cavil that he had correctly identified the Object.

Lest the game provide temptation for the intellectually disadvantaged, there are conditions. Second player's response must not only play directly off first player's clue but begin with the next letter of the alphabet!

Play ends with first player making a pun appropriate to second player's response, from which pun the afternoon's topic of discussion then derives.

As a very basic example (such abound among our compatriots at the café), first player might note that the tweedy, bearded gentlemen in Jackson Square Park, yonder, bears a strong resemblance to the dog accompanying him. This might inspire, if that is the correct word, first player to offer the rather obvious clue "gemini." Second player astutely locates the pair with little difficulty and notices that both man and dog are shaggy. Knowing that he must employ the letter *H* in his response, he says, "hirsute." First player, equally gifted, repartees, "Yes, and *his* suit, too!"

But there is nothing so blatant about that old fox LeBoeuf. He'd make you work for it. Achondroplasia? Didn't large animals suffer dysplasia? Something about disease, then? Distortion? Malformation?

I saw the dwarf from the side of my eye. A florid, knobby little man with a shock of grayed-rust hair, rolling at a fast clip down Decatur Street. I had but the briefest glimpse before he disappeared behind a twitter of blue-haired ladies being herded toward the painfully bad artists who lined the Jackson Square fence like second prized at a raffle. *He was oddly dressed*, I thought, *for a dwarf*.

I was abruptly uneasy. For a dwarf? What had prompted that thought, so unlike me? Despite my proudly admitted arrogances — and they were numerous — I did not think myself a bigot. I held no conscious prejudices save against lackwits and television evangelists. I was by nature and profession a predator, which implies a certain disdain of the prey, but I had oared too assiduously on life's ark of fools to demean anyone solely for being a jest of the gods. For all my failings, I held true compassion for those whose problems were not self-inflicted.

I had, therefore, to worry the question of my derogation of the little man. What had there been about his clothing to elicit that response? He'd worn ordinary, if necessarily custom-cut, trousers and jacket; and in mind's eye, shoes that left the afterimpression of high quality.

Then I realized that it hadn't been the clothing but the man himself who had registered on my mind as "odd," and that the oddity lay in his structure. The dwarf is most commonly of normal torso with disproportionately short, malformed limbs. The midget is but a small, occasionally neotenuous, version of his larger fellows. But save in his lack of stature, the little man I'd glimpsed rolling so purposefully along bore no resemblance to either. He'd been . . . something different, a creature with tiny but well-proportioned body and limbs, to which were attached head, feet, and hands of exceptional size. He'd looked, I thought, like a Thomas Nast caricature, or an illustration from a nineteenth-century children's book. In that fleeting, peripheral view I'd had, my mind had dismissed his modern clothing as inappropriate and garbed him instead in knee-breeks and wes-kit, buckled shoes and belled beaver.

LeBoeuf coughed discreetly. I'd all but forgotten the game and my unfulfilled obligation. Achondroplasia. I poked the hive of my vocabulary until a swarm of B's buzzed around inside my head. Something distorted, twisted, stunted.

Stunted!

I favored LeBoeuf, that sly monster, with my most superior smile. "Bonsai."

He laughed appreciatively and was mimicked by the nearby habitués, who had for the most part missed not only our references but their object.

"Bonsai," LeBoeuf said, and "Bonsai" again for love of its sound. He regarded me with mock rue. "Ah, *mon cher*, I thought I had you — ahem — stumped . . . with that one."

A lesser man would have rejoined with something about rooting for a better pun. I merely affected a look of extreme pain and primed my guns for an afternoon's discussion of oriental horticulture.

That evening I prepared an eclectic menu of New Orleans dishes expressly selected to annoy my guest, Allison Monaghan of the Very Back Bay Boston Monaghans. Not always Back Bay: the family fortune, so legend had it, was acquired through usury among the starving Irish and Italian émigrés in turn-of-the-century Boston (the effort spearheaded by Allison's great-grandfather, a terror known as Shanty Jack Monaghan, reliably reputed to have knocked a grown bullock unconscious with a blow of his fist). Her grandfather had used the proceeds to purchase the family's respectability, along with vulgar chunks of seafront property in spectacular parts of the world. Her father had promptly erected enormous hotels on each of those properties. Yes, *those* Monaghans.

Directly upon achieving her majority, Allison had upheld fourth-generation tradition, rebelling against the script for which she'd been groomed and running away to New Orleans to practice her essentially minor talent for photography. "My family," she was fond of announcing, "lets rooms."

She now lived a militantly bohemian existence, her life dedicated to the muse of apertures and Dektol, sustaining her artist's soul with a closet full of Christian Dior peasant blouses, several pounds of Tiffany baubles, and a monthly allowance slightly larger than the gross national product of many nations — most of which she spent on collections of old photographs. Alas, Babylon!

For all her disdain of her upbringing, Allison took inordinate pride in Boston's alleged cuisine, and constant umbrage at my chauvinism in favor of the food of La Belle Orléans. Neither pride nor umbrage, however, had thus far prevented her from joining me for dinner. So this evening I had prepared oysters bienville and crab gumbo as a riposte to New England clam chowder, *boeuf panned* with cajun rice in retort to the horrors Boston

chefs inflict on beef, and a salad featuring hearts of artichoke with touches of crisped *andouille* sausage — the whole accompanied by a selection of better domestics from Torlini's, whose cellars were established a quarter century before German George III lost the American colonies.

It was a successful meal. Allison arrived accoutered in Nikons and arcane technology, her luxuriant chestnut mane in the overpriced grasp of a bit of Mignon Faget metallurgy, and did not permit her responsibility as ambassador *ex urbis* for Boston's cuisiniers to hamper her appetite to any noticeable degree. As she pushed away the last of her pralines in cream, she fixed me with an accusatory eye. "You are a true swine. I've just put on ten pounds."

"Thank you," I replied. Then, innocently: "Irish coffee, perhaps?"

She grimaced disgust. "A glass of Thunderbird. I'm sure you have a bottle or two, stored on the radiator."

"Alas," I said, rising, "I'm just out. Perhaps I can find you some Kool-Aid." I fetched a lesser Mouton Rouge from the wine cabinet and brought glasses. Allison had flung herself upon the chesterfield — the young are prone to flinging themselves about dramatically — and had assumed her Lecture Face, a bias-cut garment, quite popular in Boston, designed to display moral superiority. I presented her with wine and took the morris chair, prepared to enjoy the lecture, knowing how much this annoyed her. I am of silver-templed vintage, allowing me an air of surrogate paternity through which Allison can exacerbate her distant, aloof father. I judged from her posture that this was to be Lecture 14-B, and I was correct.

"I cannot for the life of me understand why a man of your abilities doesn't do something with himself."

I was fascinated by the cadency of her lectures, in which I could hear all the nannies, governesses, teachers, and peers of her upbringing. I *cannot* for the *life* of me understand why a *man* of your *abilities* doesn't do *something* with himself. It was an almost voyeuristic glimpse of the sad, peculiar little hell the parvenu inflict on themselves.

She made an exaggerated gesture indicating my apartment and, by implication, my life. "Look at this, this mausoleum you live in!"

Dutifully, I regarded my quarters, glorying in them. My rooms were opulent with dark-polished wood, brocade, horsehair, the fulgency of brass, resembling more the sanctum sanctorum of an international banker than the home of a practitioner of my own subtle, dangerous profession.

"Surely you can find something better to do with yourself than lie round here getting fat."

I raised an eyebrow, and she had the grace to look contrite. "All right," she admitted grudgingly, "you stay in good shape." Then, half playful, half in spite: "for a man your age."

I smiled indulgently. "Hedonism is its own reward, my dear."

She gave me a look of purest disgust, at which I had to laugh. "What would you have me do, then?" I asked reasonably.

She made another of her extravagant gestures, nearly spilling her wine. "Anything! Write a book! Run for mayor. Open an antique store and sell all this junk furniture you've collected."

"The piece of junk you're sprawling over, my sweet, cost \$16,357."

She sighed, half frustration, half annoyance. "You're wasting your life. You're going to wind up as a French Quarter Character, like that deadbeat LeBoeuf."

I considered the idea, finding it appealing. Yes, to be *un caratère du Vieux Carré* had definite charm.

Mention of LeBoeuf put me in mind of the afternoon's game, and I found myself telling Allison about the dwarf. To my surprise, she allowed herself to be distracted from her lecture on the pitfalls of self-indulgence.

"Yes," she said, "I saw him myself. I was doing some shots of St. Patrick's, up on Camp Street, trying a new film, and he came walking up the street. When he passed the church, he made a peculiar little bow, almost mocking. It was such an odd thing to see that I didn't even think to get a shot of him." A frown appeared between her eyes. "He had the most beautiful shoes." The frown deepened. "I've seen him somewhere."

"Likely enough, if he lived in town. He *is* rather . . . distinctive."

She shook her head. "Not like that. A long time ago or something."

I put down my wine, feeling that the time had come to get to the evening's true point. "At your age, my dear," I said, taking her hand and leading her toward the bedroom, "there *is* no 'long time ago.'"

It was four in the morning when she shook me awake. "Not yet," I mumbled. "Give me another half hour, then I'll teach you all six facets of the Javanese Jewel."

"I know where I've seen him."

"Him whom?"

"The little man. The dwarf."

"Delighted to hear it." I rolled over, groping for a pillow. Allison got up and began to dress. Sighing, I sat up. "Surely you jest."

"Come on."

It was less gentlemanly intent that caused me to rise and fumble into my clothes than knowledge that Allison Leah Monaghan was not to be dissuaded of her passions, and that the night streets of New Orleans, as of most cities in these low times, belonged to the feral children. "*Quo vadis*, my dear?"

"My place, of course."

Of course.

Allison lived, if that term can be applied, in a minuscule apartment on Ursulines Street. It could, perhaps, with time and taste have been made habitable, but Allison seemed to prefer it as a combination darkroom and photographic garage sale. Immediately upon arrival, she plunged with no apparent fear into the archipelagoes of photo albums that festered on every conceivable surface. Seeing myself forgotten, I braved the refrigerator. All hope abandon, ye who enter here. Eventually I rescued wheat thins and Havarti from behind a reef of film cassettes, and added two glasses of something purple and vaguely menacing. "My compliments to your wine steward," I said, carrying the lot into the living room.

She was cross-legged on the floor, besieged by photo albums. "There," she said intensely. "I found him."

"Mirabile dictu," I said, squatting beside her. "Cheese and crackers?"

"Look," she ordered, handing me a cracked leather album of obvious age. It was open to a yellowed page of grainy old photographs, one of which immediately caught my attention. It was a street scene taken from the sidewalk, the view a row of grim tenements receding in perspective, wash hanging on lines above a crowded street filled with horse wagons, grimy boys in knickers and caps, corseted women with shawls about their shoulders, men in fierce mustaches, gaslights. And in the foreground was the photographer's subject, a dwarf.

He sat on an upturned box against the brick wall of the building behind him, a strangely proportioned little man in leather apron and soiled shirt. Between his knees was another box, a tool chest with a shoemaker's jack affixed to its top. He was looking directly at the camera, startled and intense as if taken unawares. "That's him," Allison said.

"Jesus, he's even wearing the same shoes."

I studied the face in the photograph with professional thoroughness, then looked at the album page itself. Beneath the photo, a feminine hand had inscribed, in faded brown ink, *Irish cobbler, Brooklyn, N.Y. June 1897*. "Shall I belabor the obvious, love?"

"It's him," she said stubbornly.

"No," I said as gently as possible. This was amusing but had discomfiting potential for a mind as young and impressionable as hers. "It might be his grandfather, or even his father. But it is not-not-not the gentleman we saw yesterday."

She shuddered. "Do you know what he looks like?"

"Allison. . . ."

"He looks like a leprechaun."

Allison had been right about one thing: of late I'd let myself get out of shape. Not noticeably, but enough to take the hone off. In my profession that can have fatal consequences. So for the next few days, I put myself under discipline, eschewing alcohol and the occasional Gauloise and adopting my Roots & Grubs diet, a loathsome culinary flagellation devoid of pâte, noble sauces, croissants, and all else gustatorily civilized. Twice daily I attacked my weights and Nautilus, and each evening I did climbs and tumbles.

On the fourth day, awash in self-righteous vim, I rewarded myself with a morning circumnavigation of the French Quarter, a run of which I never tire. In the quiet pearlescence of dawn, before the stinks and horns of business, the Vieux Carré presents the ghost of her antique beauty, her buildings like faded Southern Belles somnambulant with memories of magnolia-scented cotillions languorous as the Great River.

I took the counterclockwise route, up Decatur and across the top of the Quarter, along the graceful old mansions of Rue Esplanade, most now sadly declined into rabbit warrens for the faceless, soulless three-piece suits. Then down the long stretch of North Rampart past Treme and Armstrong Park and the shades of Storyville, the red-light district that had birthed *le jazz* and many of the immortals who'd played it. Then a sprint along Canal Street, my eyes fixed ahead to avoid the polished impersonality of modern commercial architecture looming on the American side of the street. And finally onto Decatur again for the leisurely jog back to my apartment.

The dwarf was just stepping out of a doorway as I ran past Rue Conti. I very nearly stumbled at the sight of him, for I knew that doorway intimately. Behind it was a small foyer with a worn linoleum floor, a foyer barred by a heavy steel door with a television camera above it. If you were recognized, or could make a case for your presence, the door would open electrically, admitting you to a musty stair. Another foyer awaited you one floor up, this one also blocked by a steel door. In that door was a bullet-proof window, and behind was Mrs. Grau, whose sole occupation was the buying and selling of gold.

That afternoon, vaguely disquieted and wanting distraction, I took Pernod with LeBoeuf at Dutch Fritzel's on Rue Bourbon. "A game, *mon vieux*?" he asked. I shrugged. Then, seeing he was expectant, made the effort. I noted a mule-drawn tour buggy approaching. "Wain," I said, hoping to burden him with a response utilizing the loathesome X.

LeBoeuf chuckled. "You're thinking about the leprechaun."

At my look of mild astonishment, he smiled smugly. "Simple." He nodded at the tour buggy, just passing. "Buggy to wagon to wain — an archaic word, fey even, reeking of the British Isles, of goblins and elves and . . . leprechauns."

I admitted my preoccupation, though not my morning's encounter with the strange little man. What had he been doing, coming out of Mrs. Grau's?

I knew, of course. The possibilities twisted in me.

"That earnest young wench of yours has been flogging her old photograph all over the Quarter," LeBoeuf said, "trying to convince us that Mr. Flavin is a hundred-year-old leprechaun."

"Flavin?"

LeBoeuf nodded, enjoying himself. "He's a shoemaker. He left his card with our estimable host over there, and Allison wheedled it out of Dutch with orders to pass it along to you." He produced the card with a minor flourish. It was of heavy stock embossed in kelly-green uncial. LIAM FLAVIN, FINE CUSTOM FOOTWEAR. There was no telephone number, just an address on Magazine Street. "I don't recall a shoe shop in that block," I said turning the card over gingerly. I half expected to see an inscription in faded brown ink.

"Nor I," LeBoeuf said, "but it's there. Dutch says Flavin doesn't advertise. Carriage trade sort of fellow, depending on word of mouth."

I nodded, beginning to get the shape of Mr. Liam Flavin. "An excellent tactic if you have true artistry. It allows you to charge what the market will bear."

LeBoeuf sipped his Pernod, watching me speculatively. "Do you know Reilly Quinn?"

"Of course." The pockmarked Quinn boasted of being the Town Drunk, no small accomplishment in New Orleans.

"He claims to be from the Auld Sod. Vale of Avoca or somewhere around there. He told Allison there was a sure way to spot a leprechaun."

"No doubt. After a quart of Bushmills chased with Guinness stout, you can spot almost anything you choose."

"They all have crooked little fingers on their left hands."

I gave him an indulgent look. "Digital curvature is a genetic inheritance, common to whole strains of *Homo sapiens* and certain families of colobus monkeys, not one of whom lives under a toadstool or dances Irish jigs in the moonlight."

LeBoeuf's eyes were still thoughtful. He leaned his bulk across the table. "True enough, *mon cher*. But I saw you file that information away." He leaned even closer, his expression one of sober concern. "There is a very fine line between fantasy and delusion."

"Yes, yes," I said, annoyed and perhaps guilty. "I am aware of that boundary."

"I hope so, my friend. Young Allison has lost it — temporarily, one hopes — and will need a steadying voice to find it again." A sly twinkle appeared in his eyes. "If I had the interest, and your reputed stamina, I would be that voice, for I am obviously the more worthy of us. However, fate had decreed—"

"Natural superiority, not fate."

"— that the poor child must settle for second best. You are honor-bound to give what clumsy assistance you can render her."

I raised my glass. "A sacred duty. I will think of you fondly and with considerable smugness the next time I render unto Dear Allison, knowing you are eating your lecherous, cholestrol-larded old heart out." I tossed off my Pernod and banged my glass on the table, fixing LeBoeuf with a vulpine eye. "Wain! X-up or pay up!"

I telephoned Allison at six that evening, obscurely concerned for

her stability. Leprechauns, indeed!

She did not answer, and I was left to dine alone. I am normally content with this prospect, but this evening it held small appeal. As an assuage I decided to gift myself with adventure, to let chance lead my palate whither it would. In most American cities this is an unrewarding pursuit that culminates in surrender to the horrors of fast food or some *avant* parody where both the waiter's hair and the salad greens are blow-dried. But for all their lack of cultural sophistication in other areas, New Orleanians will not suffer bad food, and the meanest café is apt to hold gustatory reward.

I dressed comfortably and took shanks' mare to Canal, there to board the St. Charles Avenue streetcar. I rode the swaying car to Lee Circle and debarked into the ethnically rich section known by the pretentious as the Lower Garden District and by its inhabitants as the Irish Channel. It is a culinarily blessed part of town boasting half a hundred restaurants offering every conceivable cuisine, including, of late, Vietnamese.

I wandered the area, pausing to shop the menus most establishments had posted in their windows. I did not consciously direct my steps toward the river, nor did I consciously turn onto Magazine when I reached that street. But I was not, I think, surprised to find myself standing across the street from the address on Liam Flavin's business card. It stood on the corner, a small wooden building of the type New Orleanians call a shotgun — that is, a building one room wide and however many deep. There'd be a fenced yard behind it, I knew.

It was now just past seven, and in the strangely abrupt twilight, the building had an insubstantial quality to it, as if it were not altogether there, or, if so, that it might take flight at any moment and dissipate like smoke.

I shook myself out of that nonsense and crossed to the building. Its narrow front offered a raised door above three concrete steps, and a large window that had been converted into a display case with red velvet drapes. A shaded lamp depending from above illuminated the sole item in the case, a pair of superbly crafted men's shoes, almost antique in style, which exhibited the subtle, elusive grace of ultimate quality. Whatever else, Liam Flavin was a cobbler of unexcelled skill.

I stood there on the banquette, hesitant. But light showed through the fanlight above Flavin's door. I climbed the steps. A small brass frame held one of Flavin's cards. The knob turned easily, a bell tinkling as I stepped inside.

An electric shock went through me as our eyes met for the first time.

The shop was small and neat, and smelled richly of leathers and dyes and waxes. Around the walls were racks of exotic hides, each more beautiful than the last and all of flawless quality. The room's only furnishings were a leather-upholstered chair and fitting stool, and a long, low oaken counter near the back wall. A curtained doorway behind the counter let into the rest of the building — the cobblery itself, I assumed, and Flavin's quarters. Would there be accessible windows back there?

At that moment, Liam Flavin stepped through the curtain, and our courses were inexorably set. An electric shock went through me as our eyes met for the first time. The metal leaves its mark. We were brothers in its fraternity; recognition had been mutual and immediate.

It was, in our case, a brotherhood of predator and prey. And yet, somehow, it was I who was suddenly wary. In that first heartbeat's recognition, I had seen abrupt, tense awareness flicker behind Flavin's eyes. But it had vanished on the instant, replaced by a kind of mocking, almost taunting, amusement — as though he'd been momentarily startled by a viper and then realized that for all its venom, it was, after all, just a snake. And indeed, I found myself apprehensive, almost unnerved, like a cobra confronted with a tasty rat that, seen from another angle, had somehow become a mongoose.

Then, with a sudden jerk, he was coming around the counter toward me, and I had to resist the urge to back away. His strange proportions gave him a peculiar rolling gait, a grotesque progression with nothing comic to it. He came with the sinister grace of one who, at need, can be both quick and accurate in motion. He stopped a scant handbreadth away and looked up at me as though my skull were transparent. There was definite mockery in his mossy green eyes. "Well, now," he said, the slightest brogue to his voice, "it's shoes you're wanting."

He was scarce four feet tall, yet seemed in some uncanny fashion to loom over me. "Yes," I said faintly. Then: "Of course, yes."

He went immediately and straddled his fitting stool, gesturing me to the leather chair. "Both shoes, please. And the socks."

I moved almost mechanically to the chair and took off my footwear,

feeling curiously shy as if I were a schoolgirl baring her breasts for her first man. The feeling increased when Flavin took first one foot then the other in his powerful, calloused hands, pressing the feet for the bones beneath, rolling the flesh with almost erotic delicacy. I stared down at his rust-streaked gray mane. He'd almost struck a pose when he'd stepped into the shop, as if to invite inspection. He wore a cream-colored linen shirt, its cuffs neatly turned to the middle of his tiny, wiry brown forearms, and pale russet slacks above extraordinary shoes that looked to be a cross between the spatted dress pump of the past century and the hook-and-eye brogan. The effect of this ensemble was somehow deliberate, as though he intended the very normalcy of his shirt and trousers to emphasize the perfect proportions of his tiny body and limbs, and thus, with the aid of his singular shoes, to exaggerate his abnormally large head, hands, and feet. There was, I realized, a power in the man's willingness to exploit his malproportion.

Flavin pressed sharply with a spatulate thumb, sending bright pain through my foot. "There's a bad bone here in the metatarsus, broken in childhood and poorly set." He set the foot down. "Good feet nonetheless."

"Thank you."

He regarded me a moment. "You run."

I nodded. Was that an observation by a man who knew feet, or had he noted me as he'd come out of Mrs. Grau's? His hooded eyes told me nothing.

"You may dress now," he said, getting up.

I did so, still feeling that odd sensation of having been *known*.

Flavin went through the curtain and returned with an earthenware jug and two glasses. "You must accept my design," he said firmly as he set the glasses on the counter. "That is the only way I work."

"Of course," I said, my voice booming slightly with a spurious bonhomie that was, at heart, an attempt to regain my sense of self and control. "One does not dictate to an artist."

He unstopped the jug and poured as I joined him at the counter. "Not art. Just craft, pursued with . . . obsession. For a very long time." He offered the whiskey with a gesture that was both invitation and challenge, like a duelist presenting the pistol box.

I was suddenly cautious. Would his metabolism be different? I willed myself to take the nearer glass without hesitation, and lifted it in toast.

"To obsession, then," I said defiantly.

"Obsession." He watched me as we drank, his green eyes unblinking. "Its joys and sorrows."

I drank again, appreciative of the fine, fiery liqueur. "*Uisage Beatha*."

His thick, windswept eyebrows rose. "The Water of Life, indeed! You have the Gaelic, then, the Beautiful Tongue?"

I shook my head. "Just a love of words." Then, feeling an obscure urge to push: "Among other things."

He smiled and looked round at his racks of beautiful hides. "Something in gold for you, I think."

"Why not." I was of a sudden keenly aware of my position, of the eerily powerful little man before me and the near certainty that he knew my true purpose. I felt an overwhelming urge to be away, to ring down the curtain on this Victorian comedy of manners in which we bowed and mouthed politeness while a great, black-draped runaway carriage thundered down on us. I made show of consulting my watch and reaching for my wallet. "A, um, deposit . . . ?"

For a moment I thought he was going to burst out laughing. Instead, he took my elbow, steering me toward the door. "Under the circumstances," he said, "I see no need." He held the door for me, but I froze on the threshold, staring down at him in fierce elation. "It's true, isn't it?" I whispered.

He smiled up at me. "I will be . . . ready tomorrow evening. Come about this time." He extended his big hand. "*Slan agus saol agaibh*."

"Pardon me?"

"Health and long life to you." Then, with offhand earnestness: "You really should learn more Gaelic." He gave a courtly little bow and closed his door. Half a minute later the shop went dark.

I walked back to the streetcar line, shivering, chilled by more than the night wind off Lake Pontchartrain, disturbed in some profound way. It had all been so fast! As if from that first sight, it had been he and not I who, in some strange fashion, was in control of what had been set implacably in motion. But does the lamb hasten so eagerly to its rendezvous with the wolf?

Yet I could not have been mistaken! The metal leaves its mark.

And the little finger of his left hand had been as crooked as an Irish walking stick.

* * *

I slept but poorly and awoke in a state of calculation, my mind upon a lesson I had learned almost forty years earlier. I had survived the hazards of my profession by absolute adherence to certain rules, among which were two primes: never jeopardize your anonymity, and never operate in your own city. I was now contemplating breaking both those rules, and the thought put a cold knot in my intestines.

But rules are violable: meant to serve, not dominate. Forty years earlier I'd learned this from a true Master, a man so good he'd gone to his grave laughing, wealthy and respected, no bend sinister upon his escutcheon, his profession as unsuspected as his exploits had been public. He had taught me a rule by which to break rules.

"Picture," he'd said one sunny morning on the Côte d'Azur, "the best possible result should your rule breaking succeed."

I had done so, in loving detail.

"Now, picture the worst possible result should your rule breaking bring you grief, your enterprise fail."

I had done this, too, though in less detail, being very young and thus not prepared to credit the existence of failure.

He had then crossed his exquisite, talented old hands on the marble tabletop. "Now, my lad, if the *chance* at the best possible result is worth the risk of the worst, break your rules, mount the tiger!"

I owed my freedom and possibly my life, many times over, to the caution that wisdom had inspired in me.

The risk here was substantial, possibly lethal. Too much was public — Allison had seen to that! Her broadcasting of the photograph would put Flavin on the run.

For, yes, Liam Flavin was the man in the photograph. Not a descendant, not a whim-of-fate look-alike, but the man himself. My freedom had too often depended upon my ability to make absolute identification — private guards, detectives, the shadowy hunters of night's birds of prey. And for all mankind's near infinity of numbers, no two faces are ever exactly alike, exactly replicable. It was he.

And it would put *me* on the run. Sooner or later, connections would be made, curiosity become official. Sooner or later, hounds would begin to bay in the fog-shrouded distance. Win or lose, I would have to surrender

this innocently decadent old city I loved and the persona I had so carefully established here.

Was Flavin truly something other than human, as Allison in her youthful romanticism would have it? There was a power in him. A deep power. But I was not prepared to attribute it to magic. I had known men of great and often uncanny power, and not one had been able to weave a spell against me.

But two things about Liam Flavin could not be denied. He was incredibly old, and he was a brother in the obsessed fraternity of the Metal. It was these two realities that comprised the *chance* I was now balancing against *risk*.

For a moment I considered my victim with empathy. The gifts of the gods are always barbed. They had given him that most foolishly longed-for commodity, extended life, and then cursed him with a face and form that precluded anonymity. How many times had he moved in his extraordinary life? How long could a man live in one place before it was remarked that he did not age as other men did? How much gold could a man amass in a hundred years? In two hundred? The thought was a sweet sickness in my gut.

And here was the crux of it: How could such a man, a man whose life could no more withstand close scrutiny than my own, how could he complain of being robbed?

I made my decision.

When Mrs. Whist, my twice-weekly housekeeper, arrived at nine, she found me in robe and slippers, my chair surrounded by travel brochures and tomes on antique furniture. She regarded me with jaundiced eye and set about her work in tight-lipped disapproval. At ten she brought croissants and coffee. "You're off again," she accused.

"I am," I replied, my tone the correct bit defensive, priming her. She launched into a tirade, grown comfortable with repetition, against allegedly mature gentlemen gallivanting about the world to haggle over scratched tables and dented breakfronts when they ought to be married and properly miserable. I endured her scold with satisfaction: it furthered verisimilitude that my sporadic week-long jaunts appear the result of whim or ennui. From the same motive, I ensured that she overhear my telephoned orders securing a flight to Montreal on the morrow, and a suite at the Laurentian there.

I would make that flight, and accept my rooms, being just conspicuous enough to register on the memories of air hostesses, bellhops, and dealers at the antique convention being held at the Laurentian. For if three people recall seeing you on Monday, speaking with you on Wednesday, who among them will not swear that he has seen you on Thursday also, spoken with you on Friday?

At noon I made close inspection of Mrs. Whist's cleaning efforts — herself following indignantly behind — and pronounced myself satisfied. I then instructed her regarding household purchases to be made in my absence, thus ensuring that knowledge of my departure would gallop the Vieux Carré with the urgency of fresh gossip, and gave her the week's paid leave. She gave me final admonitions on the evils of foreign women and foreign parts, and departed in self-righteous satisfaction.

I exchanged my coffee for a pitcher of mimosa, a delightful New Orleans patio drink, half orange juice and half pale champagne, and lit a Gauloise. I then commenced packing. Not the real packing, the new face and identity: those had lain in patient readiness for twenty years. But the packing that would be expected, that would be recovered and picked over by bored officialdom after my unfortunate, fiery demise in Canada.

The telephone rang at two. It was LeBoeuf. "Xanadu."

"Comment?"

"Wain," he elucidated. "Leprechauns to Faerie to fabled cities to Xanadu. Voilà!"

I considered it. "No, my friend," I said lugubriously, "that won't do at all. It strains the rules and exhibits but half a wit. I am only happy that you chose to embarrass yourself in private rather than among our admirers. No refund — and for a bottle of decent cognac, I will refrain from broadcasting your shortcomings."

"You are a heartless man, *ma petite vache*. Pistols at sunset?"

"Afraid not. There's a show in Montreal."

LeBoeuf laughed. "Thank God I am afflicted with smaller lusts than antique furniture." Then: "You're taking Allison?"

"As a matter of fact, no."

There was a small silence. "I assumed she'd been with you this past day or so. She's not been out and about, and she still doesn't answer her telephone."

There was genuine concern in his voice. "The young are erratic," I said

lightly. "Perhaps she has encountered a dashing young *cavalier* from one of those Midwestern states that start with a vowel."

"Your smugness will be your undoing, old goat. One day she will fly away and leave you to corrupt other innocents."

"Is that the pot I hear, barking at the kettle?"

We spoke a bit longer in like tone, and rang off with promises of dire vocabular revenges upon my return.

I would miss LeBoeuf.

The packing finished, I removed to my balcony overlooking Decatur Street, as I did before every trip, and spent the shank of the afternoon perusing my books on antiques in full view of my neighbors and the tourists passing below. Verisimilitude. Only when the day empurpled did I go inside again. There I dressed carefully in dark blue hooded jogging suit and black running shoes. And for the first time in my career, a weapon, a 9mm Walther PPK-S loaded with SuperVal hollowpoints. Adventure is a practical business: romantics do not survive long.

I let myself into the hidden chamber behind the huge armoire in my bedroom. I did not look back.

I stripped the chamber, placing everything into a heavy satchel. My scales and assay equipment, my crucible, my molds. All the tools with which I made untraceable the shaped and crafted metal that was my soul, my fixation, my reason for living. Gold. Anonymous, accepted without question everywhere, something that could not be accomplished with faceted stones, serially numbered papers.

I checked the chamber. It would be found, of course, but it would now be mute, all the tales it could tell packed into the satchel for delivery to that most excellent keeper of secrets, the great Mississippi. Satisfied, I gathered my traveling cases, my soon-to-be identity, and an empty duffel, and went down the back stairs.

I made my way to the untended, yearly rental garage where, under another name, I had long kept a nondescript automobile, and drove the few blocks to Allison's. It was part of her independence that she had never given me a key to her apartment, and part of her *naïveté* that she imagined this would be an impediment to me.

She was not there, nor had I expected her to be. The apartment had been ransacked, thoroughly and in no haste. There would, I knew, be but a single item missing, a grainy old photograph. "*Au revoir, Chérie,*" I said.

It was not yet full night when I parked on the side street just behind Flavin's building. I settled back to wait, listening to the strong, steady beat of my heart. Tomorrow I would be in Montreal. Two days later there would be a tragic room fire at the Laurentian, and another man would recross the border. He would meander south, stopping here and there to do business with certain financial institutions known for their discretion. And south again while the magic of electronics caused his wealth to become ciphers in the atmosphere, and a new, vastly larger balance to be struck in numbered accounts around the world. Then that other man, that man so carefully constructed, that man who had lain dormant there past two decades, would take wing for the land of *carioca* and *carnival*, there to establish himself in a small, elegant villa, perhaps on the slopes of Sugarloaf. There'd be a yacht in the harbor below. Certainly a dusky girl, firm-breasted and womanly of hip.

Night had come like a gray wolf. It was time. I gathered my rolled duffel, checked the street, and eeled over Flavin's rear fence.

In youth I had imagined myself as a swashbuckler, and had spidered walls to make my entrances through impossible windows, skylights, turrets, creating in the process a *modus operandi* as identifiable as a fingerprint — a fact my mentor remarked before the gendarmerie of several countries could do so. I'd therefore learned to adopt the prosaic methodologies of my less-imaginative contemporaries, and now employed a simple jimmy to enter Flavin's back door.

I stood in the darkness of a small room, waiting for my senses to adjust. Any thief worth his salt works in darkness: it gives the instant's advantage should his victim come upon him unannounced.

Pistol in hand, in a state of pantherine tension, I made my way toward the front of the building.

He was waiting for me in the cobblery. He sat, relaxed, on his cobbler's box, his back against a tall, double-doored cabinet. And like me, events having come to climax, he was dressed to his true nature. Leather vest over a laced Irish linen shirt, knee britches and striped hose, silver-buckled brogans. He had a mug in one hand and Allison's photograph in the other. He smiled as I eased into the room, as though we were fellow conspirators in some complex geste. "I always knew this damned picture would be my fetch," he said. "'Twas a camera that got my Great-Uncle Leamus, back in '09. Devil's inventions, cameras." He gestured with his mug. "Your shoon are ready."

Keeping the Walther on him, I chanced a look. They lay beside a stool across the room, utterly beautiful, their uppers of a yellow leather as nascent as a virgin's eyes. I willed myself to look away. "I am not here for shoes."

He looked pained. "Wealth is replaceable, sir. Pride is not."

Was he serious or simply mocking me again? I could not tell. Still, he had gone to the trouble of making the shoes. And there would be an ironic humor in walking out in them even though they'd go to the bottom of the river with my satchel. "Very well," I said.

I went to the stool and removed my running shoes, putting them carefully in the duffel — had he thought me so inept as to leave them? I slipped my feet into his creations, which molded themselves to my flesh like a lover's caress. I had never felt anything so extraordinary as those shoes.

Flavin watched me lace the shoes. "You've not asked after the girl."

I shrugged.

"Ahhh. You're a cold one." He tossed off the last of his whiskey. "But then, your kind always are."

"Our kind," I corrected.

He shook his head. "We're no kin. My kind *earn* their wealth." Then, sadly: "It's a curse, though, lust for the metal, need to hoard it, to have it at hand, touch it. Comes from the Dwarvish blood. All my kind carry that taint, as do some of yours."

I studied him. He was so small, so old. Yet there was nothing vulnerable about him. He accepted my silent scrutiny with the quiet, taunting amusement of someone completely at his ease.

I stood abruptly, my pistol held firm. "It is time, Mr. Flavin."

He nodded. "Yes, I believe it is." He got off the stool and moved it aside. "You'll not be needing that great ugly gun," he said. "That much of the Old Tales is true: you've but to put hand or hamper on us."

"Nevertheless," I said, moving toward him, "I'll keep faith in my weapon. I doubt that you are proof against bullets."

"No," he agreed. "We're a long-lived folk compared to you, but mortal as any poor sods the gods have made." He opened the cabinet's right-hand door and was amused as I backed a wary step away. "No magic, either."

He swung the door, and in that instant he could have walked over and taken the pistol from my nerveless fingers.

Gold. Gold in bars, in stacks of coin, in nuggets and incongruous plastic bottles of softly ferocious dust. I was near fainting.

"Two hundred ninety-three pounds, six ounces, troy," he said lovingly. "Product of 109 years at the cobbler's bench." Then, softly: "This time."

The calculation staggered me. Even after brokers' and bankers' fees, I would realize almost one and a quarter million dollars. Correctly applied, invested with traffickers in high-demand commodities, that sum would quintuple in a year, and in five I would be independent. If the chance at the best is worth the risk of the worst. . . .

"Just step over there, Mr. Flavin, where I can see you."

He moved obligingly to the far side of the room and watched with folded arms as I unrolled my duffel bag and began feverishly filling it with gold. It was a weight to reckon with when I was done, but I had only to get it to my car. I hefted it experimentally, then grunted it onto my back.

"Shall I get the doors for you?" Flavin said with exaggerated unction.

I smiled. "If you'll excuse the paraphrase — considering the circumstances, I think not." Then, thoughtfully: "Just out of curiosity, how old are you?"

A fierce pride flared in Flavin's mossy eyes. "I do not actually remember the Blessed Padriac," he said carefully, "but I had it of my mother that while I was yet in diapers, he set me on his holy knee."

I could find no reason to doubt him. I saluted with my pistol. "Good-bye, Mr. Flavin. It has been . . . enriching to know you."

My feet wouldn't move.

The shoes!

In my profession, hesitation can be fatal. I dropped the duffel and centered my weapon on Flavin's forehead. "Call it off."

His smile was benign. "I think not."

Calmly, dispassionately, I pulled the trigger. It thudded dully, again and again. I drew back to hurl the pistol, and it dropped from my fingers.

I bent to unlace the shoes. They jerked from under me, throwing me on my back. The left shoe lifted, pulled forward, clumped down. The right lifted, dragging me forward, clumped down.

"We're a tricky folk," Flavin said, walking unhurriedly back to the cabinet. "And while 'tis true there's no magic, there *is* power." He opened the left-hand door. Allison was in there, hanging on a hook, all her blood on the cabinet walls, drained through the stump where her left leg had been.

The shoes lifted, dragged me forward, came down. Someone was screaming, a high, thin wail. Flavin took a short, heavy ax from the cabinet and tested its bloodstained edge with his thumb. "You really should have learned more Gaelic," he said, judiciously eyeing my leg. "The word *leprechaun*, for instance." He raised the ax. "It means 'one-shoe cobbler.'"

THE LAST BRONTOSAURUS ON EARTH UNABLE
TO UNDERSTAND WHY HE CAN'T GET A DATE
FOR SATURDAY NIGHT



Kenneth Ledbetter ("Outpost On Europa," December 1986) returns with a story about a meeting on one of the moons of Uranus between representatives of humanity and of an alien race from an infrared star system. Mr. Ledbetter writes that he was in the Jet Propulsion Laboratory during the Voyager 2 flyby of Uranus in February 1986, which prompted this story.

THE CANYONS OF ARIEL

By Kenneth W. Ledbetter

243.73 La'anDay, Adjusted. (7 JUNE, 09:20 UTC)

T

O HUMAN EYES, THE INTERIOR of the scoutship would have been nearly pitch-

black, with only the barely discernible illumination of the control panel providing light. Yet, for the sensitive eyes of the ship's crew, the lighting was more than sufficient to see every necessary detail. One of the black-robed and hooded figures straightened his lengthy form from the infrared screen over which he had been hunched and turned to face the other in the center of the cramped control room.

"Oh Revered One. They have departed the first moon and are on a course toward the second," spoke the one who had risen from the terminal.

The other nodded slightly and replied, "Yes, Thal'iel. Our time for rendezvous is near. When they have landed, set a course for our arrival time at a secure place nearby on the surface. Permit them time

to adjust to their surroundings."

"Do you expect trouble, Revered One?"

"What does your experience tell you? With beings of light, who can predict? We must be as cautious as time will permit."

"Yes," Thal'liel agreed. He hesitated before continuing. "We have attempted to touch. It was not successful."

The other seemed to consider this for a prolonged moment before he replied. "You must exercise caution. The success or failure of our mission will be determined by your actions." Turning, he floated quickly from the room.

7 JUNE, 16:10 UTC

THE SPACECRAFT had been on the surface of Ariel an hour already, and geologist Stanley Trexler fidgeted, anxious to get outside and begin exploration. Unfortunately, he had to wait for expedition security to check out the site for supposed dangers. Misplaced priorities was one problem with a diplomatic mission over a scientific mission, he thought. Of course, he should consider himself lucky even to have been invited. It was only at the last minute they decided to include the three scientists and arrive a week early for a little exploration. His prior experience in the Jovian system had secured the spot, and he was elated, for, at fifty-three, this was probably his last interplanetary voyage.

This was mankind's first personal visit to the Uranian system. It wasn't exactly easy and convenient to get to. The unmanned *Voyager 2* spacecraft had provided a first look way back in 1986, and that mission had been possible only due to an alignment of the outer planets that occurs once every 172 years. Even with gravity assist from both Jupiter and Saturn, the *Voyager* mission had taken nine years. Fortunately, with politics solidly behind this mission, a significantly more powerful booster, and a complicated Earth-Moon—Earth-Jupiter gravity-assisted trajectory, their vehicle had been able to reduce the total mission duration to a barely tolerable three years. However, three years in a cramped spacecraft for eight men was still long enough to strain relationships. The arrival at Uranus had thankfully relieved the tension.

They had landed first on Miranda, the closest of the five principal

moons to the nearly featureless, aquamarine cloud tops of Uranus. The smallest of the five, at 492 kilometers diameter, Miranda nevertheless had features that were dramatic. Gouged and tortured by forces still not understood even after six days of intensive close-up study, the rugged surface of Miranda was a geologic laboratory. Now they were on Ariel, the second of the major moons from Uranus. It was significantly larger, 1,168 kilometers in diameter, with terrain almost as rugged as Miranda. It was here the meeting that had prompted their long journey across the Solar System would transpire.

Trexler heard the air lock cycling, indicating the captain and his three crewmen had finished their security inspection. If no problems had been detected, he would be allowed to disembark. That is, he would as soon as he could cram his slightly overweight body into a space suit.

7 JUNE, 16:20 UTC

ROB COWELL waited impatiently for the crowded air lock to cycle to full pressure. It shouldn't take too long, he thought, since the four spacesuited figures, wedged together, filled the air lock to near capacity, yet it seemed an eternity. Cowell was young, of medium height and thin. He had seemed to grow slimmer on this, his first flight. An uncertain feeling he couldn't quite identify had been disturbing his sleep and his appetite, and he felt it even stronger here on Ariel. He was glad to be back inside, even though Jake Lessing and his security crew had found nothing unexpected outside. The spaceship's landing pads had come to rest solidly on firm soil, and there was no evidence of anything in the ship's vicinity that was cause for alarm. Especially, there was no sign of aliens; that was what really mattered. The fact that the four of them had been the first humans to set foot on Ariel never even occurred to Cowell.

Finally the inner door opened; they stepped inside and began removing their space suits. He listened abstractedly as Captain Lessing announced all was clear and approved Trexler's request to go exploring. As for Cowell, he wasn't at all sure it had been a good idea to bring the scientists along on such a critical mission. If the crew had to act fast to protect the ship, the ambassador, or the interests of mankind, the scientists just might be in the way.

After the three scientists, accompanied by the crewman Jacobsen, had departed, Lessing sent the remaining crewman Rollins to rouse the ambassador, who had not emerged from his quarters since the landing. Then Lessing and Cowell moved to the control panel to verify the status of the ship's subsystems. Jake Lessing was a broad-shouldered man in his mid-forties, whose original black hair was salted with more than the usual white. He had the manner of command about him and had been called on more than once during the voyage to settle heated disputes. He prided himself on being able to maintain a relatively sane mission.

"Captain. Do you think they'll come?" Cowell asked.

"After a three-year voyage, they'd better."

"We might be better off if they didn't."

Lessing glanced up from the panel display, his brows knitted. "Why do you say that?"

"We don't know anything about them, except what they've told us, which is precious little. They say they come from a planet circling a dark star several light-years away; that they can't come into the Solar System farther than Uranus because they can't take the Sun's radiation; that we have something they want to trade for, but they won't identify it, nor what they'll give us in exchange. It just sounds phony to me."

"There's a little more information than that," Lessing responded, turning back to the instruments. "We exchanged messages with them for two years before we left."

"It took them that long to convince us to come out here. Do you realize they've been wandering around our outer Solar System for at least five years now? What have they been up to all that time?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're a patient race."

"Yeah, patient like a spider waiting in its web for the fly."

Lessing looked up again and frowned. "It seems you've been down a lot lately, Rob. Is it the strain of the long mission, or the uncertainty of what we'll find here?"

"Maybe some of both, Captain." He managed a weak smile. "It's just that we'll be totally at their mercy. Earth is three years away and can't be of any help. What kind of bargaining position is that?"

"Those arguments were all addressed before we left. It's a risk we're taking. You knew that before you signed up."

"I know. I accepted that, but three years is a long time to think about it."

"Captain!" The cry echoed through the passageway from the crew's quarters. Both men turned immediately toward the sound as Rollins appeared in the passageway entrance. "Captain. It's the ambassador. I think he's . . . dead."

Lessing bolted upright, too fast in the low gravity, and barely managed to avoid hitting his head on the bulkhead. Quickly correcting his balance, he hurried across the control room, through the passageway, and into the ambassador's quarters. The ambassador was not experienced in space travel; thus, whenever the ship was landing or departing, even on low-gravity worlds, he strapped himself in his bunk. He was there this time, too, but now there had been no attempt to get out. Lessing felt for a pulse and found none.

"Coswell. Go radio the doctor and get him back in here. Tell him to come now, but don't imply it's a panic situation. There's nothing the doctor can do but try to find the cause of death."

7 JUNE, 16:40 UTC

THEY HAD landed at the mouth of one of Ariel's great rift canyons. With the crazy orbital tilt of the Uranian system, much of the canyon remained in deep shadow. Even the sunlit portions weren't bright, since, at Uranus's distance, sunlight is 360 times fainter than on Earth. It was something like evening twilight, but much more foreboding because of the un-Earthly landscape.

Before them, a pair of mountains that formed the canyon walls rose on either side to an equivalent height and fell away toward a common vanishing point, leaving the impression of standing at the bottom of an immense, flat-bottomed groove. Small-scale relief and larger irregularities farther back in the canyon helped slightly to dispel the illusion. Actually, the fault-created canyons were little more than gigantic grooves, although from orbit the majority could be seen to gradually bend. In the opposite direction, a flat, cratered plain stretched until it fell off the edge of the all-too-near horizon.

Trexler and Martin Wakefield had left the other scientist and the crewman examining rocks and soil in the immediate vicinity of the ship and had driven the electric car about half a kilometer into the canyon. With its open structure and large wire-mesh wheels, the car resembled

the ones that the Apollo astronauts had taken to the Moon on man's first foray away from Mother Earth. However, this one was significantly more powerful and could reach sustained speeds of almost fifty kilometers per hour for several hours before a recharge was needed.

Wakefield was a biologist and, more important, a medical doctor. Although no one expected to find any natural life-forms on the moons of Uranus, the fact that they were to meet with aliens from elsewhere argued strongly for a biologist. Since the crew would also need a doctor on such a long voyage, Wakefield was an ideal candidate. He was also British, but that was no fault of his own.

The two scientists were discussing the difficulty of distinguishing features in the obscurity of the shaded areas, when the call came through their suit radios.

"Base calling Dr. Wakefield. Come in, please."

Wakefield glanced over at Trexler. "This is Wakefield. What is it?"

"This is Rob Cowell. The captain asked me to call you back to the ship. We have a problem on board."

"What's the nature of the problem?"

"Ah . . . Captain Lessing would rather talk to you directly than broadcast that information, . . . in case someone's listening."

"Poppycock. Who could be listening, except us? Is it an emergency?"

"Negative, but the captain would still like you to return immediately."

Wakefield shut off his transmitter and leaned over so that his helmet touched Trexler's. "Well, old chap. What do you make of this? Do you suppose it's something serious, or do they just envy our fun out here?"

"Don't know, but I supposed we had better find out."

Wakefield nodded, sat back, and reactivated the transmitter. "Roger, Base. We are returning."

7 JUNE, 20:45 UTC

THE SEVEN remaining expedition members lounged around the control room under a canopy of gloom. Cowell was situated to one side of the others near a viewport where he could occasionally glance outside at the deepening shadows in the canyon. Lessing and Wakefield were at a central table. The others listened somberly as the doctor spoke.

"I really don't have the proper equipment to conduct an autopsy, Captain, but from what little evidence I can see, the man had a heart attack. That's really no more than an educated guess, though."

"Your educated guess is better than our uneducated one, Doctor. But are there other alternatives?" Lessing asked.

"Well, from his color, he appeared that he had trouble breathing, so he could have asphyxiated, but that can happen when the chest constricts with a heart attack."

"Were his breathing passages clear?"

"Oh yes. He didn't choke on anything."

They all sat for a moment in silence. Then Cowell spoke in a low but distinct voice. "Are you suggesting, Captain, that it might be murder?"

Murmurs of disbelief passed through the room as Lessing stared hard at Cowell for several seconds before he replied. "I'm just trying to look at all possibilities. I suppose that, however improbably, murder is a possibility."

"Are the people in this room the only suspects, or are you considering . . ." Cowell jerked his thumb toward the viewport. ". . . *them* as a possibility?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Cowell," spoke Trexler. "How could someone outside the ship cause the ambassador to die without a mark on him?"

A sly grin crept across Cowell's face. "Maybe they have ways we don't know about. Maybe they prefer that we don't have a skilled negotiator when we get to serious discussions."

Lessing shook his head in exasperation and used Cowell's last comment to redirect the conversation. "We *do* have somewhat of a problem with the ambassador gone. I suppose I will have to handle the negotiations, and I don't consider myself skilled at diplomacy. I'll have to insist on contacting Earth at any major bargaining point, and that will cause infuriating delays with round-trip communication time almost six hours plus whatever time they need on the ground to develop an answer to our questions. Fortunately, Earth is above the horizon for most of Ariel's sixty-hour day because of this system's tilt toward the Sun." He glanced at his watch. "The delay is infuriating already. The message we sent to Earth asking for advice is just now arriving. It'll be at least three hours before we hear from them."

"We don't have that long, Captain," Cowell said softly. "They're here."

The others turned toward Cowell, but his attention was focused outside the viewport. Even in the bright light of the control room, his face was ashen.

7 JUNE, 21:10 UTC

THE GREETING party consisted of the captain, the three security men (Cowell, Jacobsen, and Rollins), and Trexler and Wakefield. The third scientist remained inside to narrate into the ship's computer the events that he saw from viewport and heard over the radio. The computer would relay every word to Earth, in case something unexpected happened. It took two cycles of the air lock to get the entire party onto the surface, but once there, they began hiking toward where the alien ship had landed. That site was inside the mouth of the canyon, deep in the shadow of the left wall.

"You'll notice, Captain, they didn't land out in the open where we could see them," Cowell's voice came over the headset. "I'd advise caution."

"They told us they don't like direct sunlight," Lessing replied. "Their actions are consistent."

"A convenient dislike, perhaps?"

"Shut up, Cowell," snapped Lessing. "This is going to be difficult enough without your negative remarks."

The outline of a metallic ovoid on tripod legs gradually emerged from the murk as they marched toward the shadow. It wasn't until they actually entered the shadow and their eyes had adjusted that they spotted the three figures standing in front of and to the left of the ship. In cowed robes, they were three motionless black cones pointing skyward. The group's motion became erratic as one by one they discovered the visitors. There was some pointing and quiet exclamations under breath. Then they were proceeding uniformly again, if more slowly.

"What I want to know is how they can stand out here without a space suit," spoke Trexler calmly. "What are they breathing? How do they protect themselves from the low temperatures and pressures?"

Lessing held up his arm and halted his group about twenty meters away. The aliens were motionless, waiting. Even at that distance, their seven-foot height was imposing.

"Are those eyes? They're huge!" exclaimed Jacobsen, his voice quiver-

ing. In fact, the eyes were all the humans could discern under the hoods. Other facial features were obscured.

The captain hesitated, wondering how communication would work in spite of assurances during pre-mission exchanges that it wouldn't be a problem. He took three steps forward and was about to speak, when the center one of the three dark figures drifted forward by an equal amount, and a bass voice boomed in his headset.

"Greetings, beings of light. In peace we come for conference."

Lessing winced at the volume of the signal. "I am Jake Lessing, captain of this exploration vessel and leader of this expedition."

"I am called Thal'liel, representative of the Revered One. We are pleased that you have journeyed across your system to meet with us here. It is our desire that both of us shall depart this place enhanced." There was a momentary pause, then a slight inclining of the conical silhouette. "You are not the ambassador we were told would be leading." It was more of a statement seeking confirmation than a question.

"No, I'm not. He is unable to leave the ship. For now I will represent my people."

"We accept that. There are questions you would like to ask before we present our proposal?"

Lessing turned slightly and cast a puzzled glance at Trexler. "Yes," he said, refocusing on Thal'liel. "You appear to wear no protection from the environment, such as the space suits we wear. It seems against nature. How do you protect yourself?"

"Our breathing mixture was absorbed into our bodies before we left the vessel in a sufficient quantity to supply our needs for some time. As for the temperature, we feel quite comfortable. It is not significantly colder than our home world. The low pressure is resisted by a contraction and densification of our outer skin, in effect forming a pressure vessel."

Lessing's eyebrows raised. He hoped for a later opportunity for further discussion on that process, but for now there was so much *basic* to learn. "What about the communication? How is it you speak English so well into our radios?"

"We have had five of your years to learn your language; however, because of the different construction of our vocal apparatus, we could not speak it without the aid of a computer. This device strapped to my torso translates my speech into your language and transmits the result at the

frequency of your radio system. It executes the reverse for your words."

Lessing peered closer and detected a small gold-colored box in the chest area of the nearest alien. It wasn't easy to do in the dimness. "Yes, I believe I see it."

"We regret we must meet at a place where your eyes cannot well see. Our vision responds to the infrared regions of the spectrum, and we can see quite well here. Beyond the shadow we would be blinded by the brightness."

"This is satisfactory for us. Let's us hear your proposal."

"As we have told you before, our world circles a brown dwarf star only nine light-years from here. To you, our sun is nearly black, but to us it shines in the infrared. Not only is our star a dwarf, but it has only one planet, and it, too, is small. It has become severely crowded, so much so that we are looking for other worlds on which to expand. The outermost part of your Solar System would suit our needs. There are worlds sufficiently large on which to live and an abundant supply of raw materials. Our proposal requests exclusive rights to the planet you call Pluto and its large moon, and the planet Neptune and its two large moons. In addition, we request mining rights in the Uranian system with perhaps an outpost or two, but we would not colonize. We would recognize your rights to the same. Uranus would be the boundary between our respective territories, where we could coexist. In the future, trade and cultural exchanges can take place here, if you so desire.

"In exchange for this, we offer you an improvement in your propulsive technology: plans and instruction for building a spaceship drive that will allow you to travel from Earth to Uranus in only one tenth the time you have spent on this voyage. It will be the means to fully utilize the worlds at your disposal and will give you the capability to visit nearby star systems. Such instruction will also result in an advance of your knowledge in the principles of physics, which in itself will lead to other areas of technological progress. That is our proposal."

Lessing let the words settle into his brain before he spoke. A better propulsion system! Expansion of humanity into space was hampered primarily by the time it took to get anywhere. What we could do with a better drive!

"Your offer is understood. We must return and discuss the matter."

"There is time," replied Thal'iel. "Such decisions must be carefully

made. We will meet here in one revolution of this moon."

The three conical shapes rotated in unison and retreated toward their ship. There was no evidence of legs or similar appendages beneath the robes; they apparently floated a few centimeters above the surface. As they neared their vessel, they merged into the blackness, and the humans could no longer distinguish them from the shadows. They never saw them enter.

After long moments of silent staring into the darkness, Lessing finally spoke. "Let's go. We have plenty to talk about." They turned and retraced their path.

7 JUNE, 22:00 UTC

THERE WERE few comments as the group removed their suits. They all seemed to be lost in thought, waiting for Lessing to initiate the discussion. Instead, he disappeared into the galley and emerged with cups of coffee, which he passed around. He hadn't had to ask. After three years together in space, he knew who liked it and how.

"All right. Let's address the issues one at a time and see if we can make some sense of it all. We have two and a half days before we meet them again." He paused and rubbed his palms across his forehead. "First, their desires. Can we afford to give them the outer Solar System?"

"What prevents them from just taking it?" Cowell interjected.

Trexler responded before the captain had the chance. "The fact they haven't already colonized in five years and instead waited for us to get here vouches for their intentions."

"But the fact remains that if we say no, they might just go ahead and take it anyway," Cowell continued. "We couldn't do anything about it."

"It's not good to us anyway," someone else said. "Neptune and Pluto are so far out they'll never be of any use to us."

"But they've promised us a faster drive to make them more accessible."

"Do you actually think they'll deliver?" Cowell asked.

"That's the strange part," said Lessing. "They've offered us a faster drive, better physics, further technological and cultural exchange, when they didn't have to offer us a thing. We hadn't even visited the outer planets, let alone staked a claim to them. It's likely they could have moved in and

settled the places without our even knowing about it."

"Is it conceivable they believe we would be a danger to them later on, after they had colonized?" asked Wakefield.

"That's possible," agreed Trexler. "It could be a major confrontation if mankind expanded and unexpectedly encountered an advanced alien race right in our own Solar System."

"But the faster drive system they're willing to give us will only advance the time of confrontation."

"And it will occur while we still remember who gave it to us," added Lessing, "rather than a few generations away when any agreement made now is long forgotten. Perhaps they're better psychologists than we give them credit for."

"Who knows how to interpret an alien mind?" Trexler stated.

"I wish I could see their faces," spoke Cowell, so softly that not everyone heard him. "You can sometimes tell if they're lying by looking into their faces."

"They're alien faces, Rob," someone said. "I doubt if you'd be able to read anything in them."

Cowell cast furtive glances about. "But why do you suppose they hide them?"

A prolonged silence was his only answer.

"Well, I must communicate all this to Earth," Lessing concluded. "Let them make the decision."

245.71 La'anDay, Adj. (10 JUNE, 02:15 UTC)

THE TWO shadowed forms faced each other in the murky room.

"Have you attempted touch again, Raen'nann?"

"Yes, Thal'liel. I touched a logical one. It also withdrew."

"And the perception of disposition?"

"I could obtain none, Honored One. The time was too brief."

"Did it sense presence?"

"I do not know. Perhaps. Perhaps not. I was subtle."

"Perhaps not subtle enough. I think we shall terminate such action until more information is available."

"Very well, Honored One."

* * *

10 JUNE, 06:40 UTC

LESSING STUDIED the message from Earth, the last of three. The first had expressed dismay over the ambassador's death and had given the captain the power to conduct the negotiations. The second had been full of questions about the initial discussions, few of which Lessing could answer. The third, now in his hand, instructed him to bargain for all of the promised information and assistance in exchange for the Neptune and Pluto systems only. As much as possible was to be up front, and the visitors would not be granted access to the Uranian system until all was delivered and analyzed — and then only a limited access would be permitted. Lessing shook his head. How Earth was to enforce that, he couldn't see, and didn't know how he could convince the aliens if they questioned it. Well, all he could do was present it, which would happen in — he glanced at his watch — less than three hours, and see how they reacted.

Most of the crew had been sleeping and were just now rising. Breakfast, if anyone could eat, would be followed by another visit in the shadow of the canyon wall. He stood up and was making his way toward the galley for a cup of coffee, when a shout halted him in midstep.

"Captain." The call came from Trexler in the crew's quarters. "You'd better come here."

Lessing didn't like the sound of this. He carefully made his way across the cabin and into the crew compartment, where Wakefield knelt over Rollins in his bunk. Trexler anxiously peered over the doctor's shoulder. "What's wrong?" Lessing asked, knowing with a shuddering certainty the answer.

"Rollins is dead, Captain." Wakefield's voice was strained. "Looks just like the ambassador. Heart attack . . . or something else."

10 JUNE, 09:25 UTC

THE TIME for the second encounter had arrived. The mood was somber, with little verbal exchange between the men as they prepared. Several were already partially into space suits, when Cowell erupted.

"This is crazy, Captain. One death could be explained, but not two. That's stretching coincidence too far. I think we're stepping into a trap.

We should just batten up the hatches and get the hell out of here."

"Cowell, we've already been through this," the captain spoke roughly. "If they indeed killed both while they were inside the ship, they could kill us all at any time. I don't see where another meeting is any more dangerous than any other course of action."

"It's more time we'll have to spend in our bunks on this world with them out there. One more night. Who will it be tonight? Huh?" He nervously scanned the silent, paralyzed faces in the room. "You've noticed they wait until we're asleep. Who won't wake up tomorrow morning?"

"Cowell!" Lessing shouted. Their eyes locked; they glared at each other.

Then Cowell's face began to soften, and his voice grew suddenly calmer. "Do you mind if I stay inside this time? I can take care of the dictation."

"Yes, I mind," Lessing spit through clenched teeth. "I want you where I can see you. Frankly, I don't trust you in here alone. Wakefield can stay and narrate to Earth." Then, more calmly to the group: "Let's do it."

Once again they cycled in shifts through the air lock. There had not been time after Rollins's death to wait for a reply from Earth concerning this meeting, but Lessing felt more confident now that the earlier message had given him authority.

They trudged silently across the plain toward the shadows engulfing the alien spaceship. As before, it wasn't until they entered the darkness that they were able to see distinctly the three conical black shapes they knew to be the others. They stopped fifteen meters away.

"Greetings. This is Captain Lessing. You are Thal'iel?"

"Yes. Once again we greet you," replied the voice from the gold box into the headsets.

"We have been in contact with Earth and have exchanged messages," Lessing began. "We have a question or two to ask concerning your proposal."

"You may proceed."

"You promised us certain information in exchange for the privilege of colonizing the outer Solar System. How is this information to be furnished? Will you interpret if we fail to understand what you provide?"

There was a moment of silence and then: "We do not understand your question of how. We will provide the information directly. Interpretation will not be needed."

"Through written materials? Surely you don't intend to just tell us."

"Have you no empathy?"

"Uh, no, I don't believe so, if I understand your meaning."

"One who hears with another's ears, understands with another's mind, feels with another's heart."

Lessing frowned, then answered. "None of us can do that."

"We then understand the confusion. It is of minor importance. Yes, we can provide you both instruction and interpretation for all the information we promised. Perhaps not all at once. The information will best be disseminated slowly over many years, but ultimately all of it will be yours."

"Why would you withhold the information if it is promised? We have a great many scientists who could be brought to bear and thus absorb the material in a relatively short period of time. We're resilient in that respect. We wouldn't limit your colonization of the moons of the outer planets to a slow trickle." Perhaps he shouldn't have said the latter. Limiting the rate at which they could emigrate might be a way of speeding up the transfer of information. But how could Earth enforce it? How could Earth enforce any of this?

Lessing was about to discuss restricting their access to the Uranian system until all promised data had been delivered, when it happened. His eyes were adapted to the darkness, and the sudden illumination temporarily blinded him. A brilliant circle of light fell upon Thal'iel. For an instant he had a glimpse of an alien visage, a narrow, elongated face with enormous, sad eyes, until the robe-covered arm shielded it. A muffled gasp emitted from the gold box, and the robed figure collapsed backward to be caught by the two behind.

Trexler had not been watching the aliens, because a moment before, his peripheral vision had detected movement from Cowell, and he had turned his head. Too late, he saw the beamlight in Cowell's hand, which had gone unnoticed. Too late, he saw the hand rise to point the beamlight toward the dark trio. When the light came on, Trexler was moving, but it still took precious seconds to cross the distance and put his shoulder into the space-suited figure. Both men sprawled into the dust, and the beamlight spun from Cowell's grasp. It was quickly retrieved and extinguished by someone, but the damage had been done. When Trexler looked up, the figures were retreating rapidly toward their craft, the one in the middle, horizontal.

Lessing's attention was riveted on the retreating aliens until anger welled up inside him. He spun back toward Cowell, who had recovered and was jogging as fast as possible back toward their ship. "Cowell. Hold it right there," he shouted.

The running figure ignored him.

"Wakefield, this is Lessing. Do you read?" He spoke into the radio.

"I'm here, Jake. What happened? All I could see was a flash of light and then nothing."

"Cowell's gone off the deep end. He's on his way there. Don't let him in until we get there."

"Roger."

Lessing didn't hurry the group back, since he could see both the ship and Cowell's form approaching it. As long as the doctor locked the air lock from the control panel, there was no way Cowell could open it from the outside. However, the captain was dismayed when the fugitive bypassed the air lock and opened the door to the electric car.

"Where do you think you're going, Cowell?" he shouted over the radio.

There was no answer.

"You'll have to come in sometime, you know. Your air supply is limited."

The car lurched into motion at right angles to their path. Lessing estimated his chances at intercepting, but quickly realized it was futile and continued toward the ship. They had only the one car, and it was too fast for anyone on foot. If Cowell had any sense left, he would return before his air ran out. Lessing didn't know whether he had any or not.

10 JUNE, 10:40 UTC

COWELL DROVE into the canyon like a man possessed. Most of the rocks he dodged. Some of them he just bounced over, which wasn't very good for the vehicle, but that was the least of his worries. He had to get away from *them*. Every few seconds he glanced furtively behind. Most of the time he didn't see anything, but sometimes he could see them in the shadows, floating along just above the ground. He didn't think they were gaining on him, but he wasn't really sure. "Don't let up!" he whispered to himself, and pushed harder on the speed control, already against the stops.

He had seen the face! He knew it. It was emaciated and sinister, pure evil. The others hadn't understood. They didn't know what they were dealing with. He had tried to tell them, but they wouldn't listen. Now he had to get away. He looked behind him again. There they were! Two of them in the shadows to his left rear, just waiting. Spiders, waiting for the fly. "Stay in the open," he told himself. "Stay in the sunshine, weak as it is in this godforsaken place. They won't dare come into the sunshine."

The canyon extended in nearly a straight line to the horizon, a vast linear rift in the surface of Ariel. Other cracks formed side canyons every few kilometers, some small and some nearly as vast as the main cut. As he approached one of these, he looked back again and, not seeing his pursuers, he turned the vehicle sharply to the right without hesitation.

"That ought to shake them," he said aloud. This branch canyon was narrower and rockier, and he slowed down to avoid larger boulders. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw no one. Up ahead, he could see this canyon was not straight but gradually curved to the left. He let himself relax a little, felt some of the fuzziness wash from his head, and for an instant, sanity began to creep back inside his mind. Where was he going to get air? But before he could really ponder the question, he looked again. There were two of them in the left shadow! He wrenched the controls back to maximum speed.

The terrain ahead made him wonder if the canyon branch had been a mistake. The gradual curve to the left put more and more of the canyon floor in the shade, and the right side was thick with boulders. Perspiration began to cloud the inside of his helmet as he looked again and felt his heart leap. The black cones were drifting along the left canyon wall as fast as the car ran. He was going to have to drive through part of the shadow to navigate around an approaching boulder field. They wouldn't catch him there; he would outmaneuver them.

Swerving the car into darkness, he skirted boulders in his path, despite reduced vision. He successfully traversed the rock-strewn canyon bottom for several minutes until he could see sunlight ahead. He was nearly there! Only a short distance and he would emerge into the safety of sunlight. Unfortunately, his path led between two boulders separated by slightly less than the width of his vehicle. The immediate, crunching stop flung him over the front and tumbled him amidst a sandy rock field.

Stunned, he came to rest on his back and stared stupidly into the

black, star-studded sky. Although his brain realized that his faceplate was broken and the air he had left was rapidly escaping through the hole, the significance escaped him.

"No. Leave me alone," he screamed, as terror gripped his entire being, not from the ebbing of his life through the hole, but from the vision of the black-robed creatures that appeared over him. As a long, bony finger reached toward the faceplate, he lost consciousness.

246.09 La'anDay, Adj. (10 JUNE, 15:00 UTC)

I HAVE ERRED, Revered One," spoke the one in the center of the chamber. His cowl was thrown back, and a light-colored cloth, wrapped around the upper part of the elongated head, covered the eyes.

"In what way, Thal'liel?" inquired the other patiently.

"In my haste to understand the motive and predication of the Earth beings, I failed to sufficiently consider the effects of empathy. It appears that both attempts caused the death of the one touched. We did not understand the fragile nature of the human mind."

There was silence for a prolonged moment, then the other answered. "And you have paid the price of your sight for your error."

"Yes, Revered One. The burns will heal; vision will not. However, we have achieved success with the one called Cowell. Raen'nann found the state of his mind far different than the others. It is believed this success will result in the success of the mission."

"Let us hope so, Thal'liel. Let us hope so."

10 JUNE, 15:35 UTC

HE CAN'T possibly have any more time," spoke Trexler. The group sat around the gloomy cabin and forlornly considered the empty scotch bottle on the table. Lessing had sneaked it aboard for celebrating their expected success. Instead, they had used it to soothe the pain of their failure. But there had been only a couple of swallows to go around, not enough to do much soothing.

"I don't believe he's coming back," said Lessing. "I should have recognized his growing insanity and had him sedated."

"Don't blame yourself, Captain. There were more important matters to consider. None of us recognized the extent of his condition."

"We have to try contact again, don't we, Jake," Trexler stated. It was stated as a fact more than a question.

"Yeah. We've come too far to give up easily. The rest of you will stay here. Stan and I will go back out there with full air tanks and wait outside their vessel until they appear. Either they'll come out or they'll take off."

"What will you tell them?"

"The truth, I suppose," Lessing answered. "I couldn't invent something that sounded any better. Let's hope they can understand insanity and don't get the idea that it's a common human trait."

"Do you suppose their deal is still on?"

Lessing didn't get the chance to answer the question. A muffled hum signaled the opening of the outer door of the air lock. They froze in startled silence, each considering the possibilities in his mind.

"Could it be Rob?" someone asked.

"How is that possible? He didn't have enough air."

The hum stopped as the outer door closed and the pumps started filling the chamber with air. Lessing leaned over the control panel and switched internal comm onto broadcast circuits. "Rob, is that you?"

There was no answer.

"Rob, this is the captain. Respond if you can hear me." He paused for reply and heard none. He briefly considered locking the internal door, but was caught in indecision. Who else could it be but Cowell? The aliens? If so, that wasn't necessarily bad. Indecision robbed him of action long enough for the hum to begin again, much louder this time as the internal door began to open.

All eyes were transfixed on the opening door. No one moved; no one made a sound. Breathing seemed suspended. The door completed its retraction into its slot, revealing a spacesuited figure who stood motionless for an indeterminately long time.

"What's the matter with his faceplate?" someone whispered.

No one answered, but it was apparent that it was damaged. The faceplate was generally opaque, except for the upper left corner. The center right side contained a circular area like smoked glass, as if a blowtorch had been applied. It had what appeared to be fused cracks radiating from it. The rest of the suit seemed perfectly normal.

The figure's hands went to the helmet and unfastened the latches. It lifted, and the normal face of Rob Cowell appeared.

"Sorry for the surprise, gents," he said, smiling faintly, "but the radio didn't work, and I couldn't call."

All but Lessing relaxed, and several jumped up to thump Cowell on the back. Voices ran together as they expressed their relief, both at his safe return and that it was not someone — or something — else in the suit.

Lessing struggled with his thoughts and uncertainties a moment, then calmly reached for his weapon. Training it carefully on the suited figure, he spoke, "All of you except Cowell sit down." The voice was not loud, but was stern and unmistakably that of command. The others quieted and returned to their seats.

"Cowell, consider yourself under arrest. And before you make any further moves to remove the rest of the suit, you'd better explain your actions, including how you managed to make it back here."

Cowell nodded in assent and began in his normal, sane voice. They hadn't heard that voice in weeks. It was only then that Lessing realized the extent of Cowell's previous insanity.

"I understand, Captain. I would do the same if I were in your position, but let me assure you, I'm perfectly all right. That wasn't true earlier. I don't understand what came over me. Perhaps the journey itself, the deaths, the visual aspect of the aliens, their desire for darkness all had their effect. I barely remember what I did. It was reprehensible. I was so possessed with this desire to expose their appearance, it overruled rational action. As it was, I blinded Thal'iel and burned his sensitive skin."

"How do you know that?" interrupted Lessing.

"I've been with them, Captain. You've undoubtedly noticed the helmet. I crashed the car in my insane frenzy to get away from them. You see, they were following me, curious as to what I intended and not understanding my condition. The crash threw me onto rocks and shattered the faceplate. I don't know exactly how they did it, but before all my air could escape through the hole, one of them sealed it with his bare hand. I had already become unconscious, but they took me back to their spaceship and replenished the tanks with the proper nitrogen/oxygen breathing mixture. You can check that yourself. There is still plenty of air in it."

"And they just let you walk back here, even after what you did?"

"Yes, but we talked first. They don't hold a grudge. They can't after

what they've done. You see, I was right about one thing." He paused and inhaled a deep breath. "They *did* kill the ambassador and Rollins."

Murmurs spread among the crew.

"Oh, but not intentionally. They have empaths among their number, those who can merge personalities for short periods of time with others. Twice, they sought to obtain an advanced reading of our feelings and intentions by just barely touching minds. They thought they could do it without being detected; they were wrong. Both men died of heart attacks, induced by the sudden shock of an unfamiliar presence in their minds.

"However, in my case it was different. I already had an unwanted presence in my mind: an irrational fear. Plus, I was unconscious when they entered. That allowed time for a settling of states and mutual recognition of identities. Once they gained empathy, they could see my problem, and fortunately, they have the techniques to correct it. I owe my recovery — and, in fact, my very life — to the efforts of Raen'nann, the empath."

Lessing lowered the gun. "Go ahead and remove your suit. I believe your story. It's the most rational you've sounded in weeks."

"There's more," Cowell continued as he proceeded to remove the rest of the space suit. "I now understand why they are so interested in the outer parts of our Solar System. Their sun is dying. It already shines only in the infrared and is rapidly becoming a cinder. In spite of the fact that normal condition for them is extremely cold on our scale, they cannot live near absolute zero. Some energy from a star is required, and theirs is about gone. Oh, it'll last for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years yet, but the problem is more complicated still. Their sun is also in an unusual orbit about the Galaxy's center. It lies inclined at an angle of nearly eighty degrees to the galactic plane. That means for most of the time, it lies above or below the plane, where stars are much more sparse. Their sun won't last until it returns to the galactic plane, so this is their last chance to transfer their population to other worlds, before the orbit carries it away from populated regions of the galaxy.

"They've had some limited success with other worlds they've encountered, placing about 20 percent of their population. They've also had some failures, where the 'beings of light,' as those are called that live in more temperate regions of a solar system, misunderstood them and either chase them out or make them extremely unwelcome. Also, the high

relative velocities of our respective solar systems means time is running out if they want to transfer part of their populace. That's why they were anxious to understand our position as soon as possible."

11 JUNE, 09:10 UTC

FOR THE third time the dark party of three and the six beings of light faced each other, ten meters apart, in the shadow of the northern wall of one of the large canyons of Ariel. The human was the first to speak.

"It's good to see you, Thal'liel." Even in the darkness, Lessing could see the bandage around his head underneath the cowl.

"Again greetings, Captain Lessing."

"We owe you a sincere apology for our actions. We have suffered you a great harm."

"Not more than we have inflicted upon you. I, at least, live."

"Neither action was totally intentional. They came through lack of understanding."

"Perhaps there is gain through loss. We have gained understanding of one another. We will never again attempt to touch except where it is mutually agreed."

"And we also have gained understanding of your plight. I have been empowered by my government on Earth to agree to your generous offer. We are pleased to have you as neighbors."

Thal'liel inclined forward. "And we, you."

As they were returning to the ship, Lessing's eye caught the two rock-covered mounds near the base of the sunlit canyon wall. He paused and let the others go ahead. Each mound had a small plaque and a flag at one end; the cost of this mission had been high. He let his gaze wander down the long, straight cut in the surface of the moon Ariel that was the canyon. It vanished over the horizon before it deviated from its straightness. He didn't have Trexler's geologist viewpoint, didn't understand the causes behind the linear feature, but he thought he could appreciate the significance of this site to the human race.

He hurried to catch up with the others.



Charles Sheffield is a British-born physicist who now lives in the U.S. His science fiction is known for its strong characterization, and in "Obsolete Skill" he creates the archetypal science fiction writer who, having dealt with the future all his life, must now face it. . .

Obsolete Skill

By Charles Sheffield

I HAD BEEN A lifelong agnostic. So when the hammerblow to the chest came at three o'clock on Friday afternoon, I knew it was the end of everything.

I had just enough time to put the pan back on the stove, curse my own stupidity — those pains in the left arm and chest were clear enough signs of heart trouble, but who likes to visit doctors — then I was falling toward the floor and the lights were going out. Good-bye, world.

It was a big surprise to drift back to consciousness and find that the world was apparently still there. CPR? But then who could have saved me? I had been alone in the house, with the alarm system on and no visitors expected. It occurred to me that I didn't merely feel pleased to be alive, like any man who has survived a massive heart attack; I felt good. Weak and feeble, sure — but healthy, if you can imagine that combination.

Without opening my eyes, I groped automatically for my glasses.

"What do you want?" said a disembodied man's voice a few feet away from me.

"Spectacles." My eyelids seemed to weigh a ton each.

"They are unnecessary."

That was enough to make me blink my eyes open. I was staring straight up at a blue-painted ceiling, glowing all over with a soft internal lighting. Every detail was visible, down to a little spiderweb of sensors over in the corner, and a raft of things like glowing pink buttons right over me. The area that I could see without turning my head held a clutter of other miniaturized electronics, doing I knew not what. Fine lines of violet light crisscrossed the whole field of view.

"Try to relax," said the voice. "The instruments are monitoring your isotonic responses, and four of them show high readings. Don't be frightened; there is no danger."

That was bad — I was supposed to understand something about self-control. I lay back and closed my eyes again.

I must not fear. Fear is the death. Fear is the little-death that brings obliteration. (No, it's not my own prescription — but it works. I've never been too proud to borrow.)

"How long has it been?" I said after a few more seconds.

There was a gasping intake of breath from the man next to me. "You know what has happened? Already?"

"I can make a good guess. I died; and now I'm not dead anymore. So somebody took me, and either they transferred my consciousness to a new body, or they froze me, cured me, and woke me up again. I'd guess the second, because it still feels like my own body. Which was it?" I opened my eyes and turned my head, to look at the slightly built man who sat at my bedside.

"Not quite either." He was staring at me in a puzzled way. "You were frozen, as you say. But the body was given certain desirable modifications before you were allowed to regain consciousness." He leaned forward. "We have revived many who were cryogenically preserved, but never one who has at once realized what has happened. How did you know?"

"Did you ever read my stories?" I looked at his smooth face — yellowish complexion, epicanthic fold on the eyes, black hair. "I guess you didn't. I've written that scenario a dozen times."

I sat up. As I'd thought, I was as weak as a cup of tea in a Scots boardinghouse. "Now you can answer one for me. *How long?*"

"Since you — died?"

I nodded.

"One hundred and ninety-seven and a half years."

Jesus. No wonder I felt rested. And weak. I was 280 years old. "Nearly two centuries. And my works are still read?"

"Not exactly." He hesitated. "Reading is no longer necessary. However, certain of your works are still *studied*."

Better than nothing. Looking at him more closely with my new twenty-twenty eyes, I noticed an odd thing about his speech. The words seemed to lag a little behind his facial expressions. That had its own implications. "Studied — but not in English," I said. "When did the language die out?"

"It did not." He smiled at me, trying to be nice. "There are still many who speak it. But as you might guess from my appearance, it is not my native tongue. My name is Chen, and my native language is a variation of Mandarin Chinese. But of course, most of the editions of your works that have survived are in Japanese."

Of course. Japanese. "And you — you are hooked up to a computer that makes the actual translation from your language to English?"

"That is correct." He saw my satisfied smile. "Again — you wrote of this?"

"A score of times." I tried to swing my legs over the edge of the bed, but I was too weak to make it. Go steady — I suspected I had plenty of time to regain my strength.

"Let's get down to the nitty-gritty," I said. "I'm here, I'm alive, and I never gave any instructions to be put in cryogenic storage. I made a lot of money, but I spent a lot, too. It must have taken a bundle to keep me down at liquid helium temperatures for two centuries. So what the hell is going on? I'm not complaining, but why aren't I a couple of hundred years dead?"

"It was a plan prepared by a group of your admirers — special admirers, the people who were known as *fans*. They argued that if anyone should be preserved for the future, you should, because you had a unique knowledge of your own times, and a special feeling for times to come. Having thought so much about possible futures, you would be less disturbed by any real future. Without telling you, they arranged for the collection of funds over the years at every one of their meetings — conventions — and placed it in an interest-bearing account pending your demise. When that occurred, you were transferred to the cryogenic vaults and prepared for storage."

No sinus headache, no postnasal drip. No buzzing in the left ear. I shrugged my shoulders, and there was no arthritic twinge from my left side. Somebody had done a good job on me.

"Thanks, fans. I don't know I deserve it, considering what I've said about you over the years. What comes next?"

"First, it is necessary that you recuperate and gain strength. That will take a few days. You will stay here for that period, since we do not wish you to experience too much cultural shock."

He frowned, and leaned forward to stare at me. I felt sure there were a dozen sensors peering out through his almond eyes. "Are you feeling all right?" he said.

"Just fine."

"I wondered, because you seem almost too calm. To arrive here, far in your future, and to know suddenly that all your friends and fellow writers are dead . . . it must be most up-setting."

"Chen, I was *old*. Hell, most of my friends and the writers that I knew well were already dead before I died." (*And I was glad to see most of 'em go, the two-faced bastards.*)

He nodded thoughtfully, and his face again went blank for a split second. "I do not have your reference system to work with. But of course, in your day eighty-two years was old. Very well. When you are fully recovered from the awakening, we have a number of people who would like to talk to you — historians, and students of twentieth-century literature. The authorship of many books from your time is left in doubt, particularly because of the translation change, to and from Japanese. The original titles have often been lost." He paused, as though listening inside his head for a second. "It is not easy to identify your output, even with the best references. For example, were you the author of a work named *Tales of New Space?*"

"Sure was."

"*Spaceship Troopers?*"

"Right."

"And *The Nine Worlds Saga?*"

"Yup."

"*The Nude Sun? And Timeskip?*"

"Sure."

"How about *Nine Princes in Aspic?*"

I shook my head. "Not me. Try farther along with the alphabet." God, I felt good. "Listen, these people who want to talk to me — didn't your records tell you that I wouldn't do interviews?"

"They do show that — but there is some contradiction. One of your biographies—"

"How many of them are there?"

"Ten." He paused at my grunt. "You are surprised?"

"I'd hoped for more. But carry on."

"The interviews. You did give interviews. One of your biographies states quite unambiguously that on a visit to Rome, you agreed to meet with a certain important person there who was a keen reader of your works. Is that not true?"

"It's true enough. But I always thought of that particular meeting as an audience with me more than an interview. I don't do interviews. Can't they just ask somebody else?" A thought struck me. "Hey, just how many other writers from my time were frozen — I mean, *science fiction* writers?" (The only sort that were worth diddly-squat.)

"Only two."

"Then who was the other? Surely not that boring old windbag—"

"No."

Big relief — a stir of excitement, too. He named the only woman science fiction writer I'd ever felt really attracted to. Sure, it made sense; her fans would have done the same for her as mine did for me. Let's hope she died young.

"She was of course born quite a few years later than you," Chen went on. "But the scholars of today know that she had read your works, and they assert that her books very clearly draw in some ways from you. There is a part of you in her."

But not the part of me I'd like. One problem with this renovated body, it had hormones flowing as I'd not felt them flow in thirty years. "I feel flattered," I said. "Perhaps she and I can meet when I am fully recovered."

"It can be arranged, though there are subtle questions to be asked of her — the social conventions have changed much since your day. A meeting cannot be assured." Chen sat up a little straighter. "You will probably also be wondering what your role will be in this 'brave new world' to which you have awakened."

"Naturally." As a matter of fact, up to that point I hadn't given it a

thought. I was going to be a writer, wasn't I? What else was there to do?

"Then I am afraid that I bring you bad news. When you were frozen, your admirers did it with the full confidence that your abilities would find unique recognition here in the future. You were widely regarded as one of the most learned men of your time, a person whose knowledge seemed almost boundless, in many diverse fields. Some suggested that you knew more than any other living human."

Some suggested! Was Chen trying to get me irritated? "They were just being kind to me," I said modestly.

"Be that as it may, your admirers had unfortunately badly misjudged the future." Chen leaned forward, an earnest expression on his unlined face. "You see, sir, there has been a change in the world, and it is one that will shock you. *Knowledge* — that which you possess in such full measure — is no longer useful. Knowledge has become an obsolete skill."

Was he crazy? There was no way, in a world that could revive a frozen corpse and bring it back to life and health, that knowledge could become obsolete. The whole technological society must depend on it. And the room I was in was a miracle of technology.

"I don't understand you," I said. "How can knowledge lose its value?"

"I will show you. Is there a subject on which you would say you are particularly expert?"

You must be kidding. "There are several."

"Then name one."

"Oh — let's say, European history. Or botany. Or communications theory. Or organ music. Or the Roman Empire. Want more?"

"Very good. That is enough. Now, ask me a question — any difficult question of fact — that relates to one of those fields."

He didn't seem to be joking. I thought for a second. "All right, I'll bite. Who was leading the French army when it surrendered at Sedan in the Franco-Prussian War? And when did it happen?"

He sat there looking half-witted for maybe half a second, then said, "MacMahon, on September 1st, 1870, at 4:15 P.M."

Once I had seen it happen, I knew exactly what must be going on. Little Chen was hooked up through some high-rate electronic link with a bunch of data banks, and he had access to them directly by thinking the right sequence. It meant he had immediate access to whole libraries — perhaps to all the libraries in today's world. Well, I could play that game,

too, once I knew how to hook in.

"You don't mean knowledge is obsolete," I said. "You mean you've replaced the need for one sort of knowledge with another. People just have to learn how to use the new sort — they need to know how to gain access to the data banks."

Again, he seemed astonished at my response.

"I wrote that story, too," I went on, before he could speak. "About implants for data access and direct mind-to-mind communication. Back in the late seventies. It didn't make much of a stir — but I noticed a lot of other people using the same idea in the next few years."

"You do not appreciate the problem," he said. "It is true, we all have access to the data banks, and you will not be denied that access. But what is involved is no simple matter of exchanging one kind of *fact* for another, as you seem to think. It is a question of structure and approach. Remember, many hundreds of people have been frozen and reawakened since the technique was perfected. We have done our best to train each of them in the use of the mental data banks — without success. I will leave you to work on this, but already I am sure of the outcome. Some banks you will learn to enter without a problem. But the general *technique* that stands behind it . . . well, I wish you luck."

He meant it, too. But I didn't share his worries for a moment. In sixty years of writing science fiction, I had picked up a working knowledge of a hundred different fields. Lots of them were supposedly difficult except for the 'specially trained.' I'd learned to recognize that for what it was: territorial imperative, an attempt to keep out anybody who hadn't paid for the formal training and the official carrying card of the profession. It was nonsense. I had picked up what I needed from scratch, on my own, without anyone around to guide me.

It was an article of faith. There wasn't a branch of know-how I couldn't acquire, or a system I couldn't master, as easily as breathing.

I shrugged. "Let me try it. Maybe I'll be lucky."

"Maybe." His tone denied the possibility.

"If I don't make it, what then? Euthanasia? The junkyard?"

Chen looked more than uncomfortable — he was horrified. "No! How can you make such a suggestion? We will arrange a pleasant life for you, along with all the others who have been reawakened. We will provide special living quarters, and excellent contentment drugs — stronger than

we have for ourselves. You will be perfectly happy."

Sure. *Walk this way, and don't worry about the slight smell of gas.* A two-hundred-year nap leaves you waking up kind of crotchety.

"Here is the way that you will interact with our system," he went on. He handed a little flat oblong across to me. "Naturally, if it turns out by some lucky chance that you *can* master full access to the data banks, we will arrange for your own implant and code signal. But it is best to begin like this. Anything else you want can be obtained by pressing this orange place on the side of the calling device."

He left, after promising to arrange for delivery of my personal belongings. Apparently, like the pharaohs, I had been sealed in the vault with at least a few possessions to comfort me when I awoke in the afterlife. Whoever made that decision understood human psychology. I found I was really looking forward to putting on some of my old convention finery—the diamond stickpin, the gold nugget cuff links, the African red-gold ring, and the silver pocket watch with its handworked chain. The final WorldCon may have been centuries ago, but as far as I was concerned, it had happened last week.

Time for the fun stuff later. I sat down at the terminal Chen had given me, and went to work.

Do you know the rotten part of all this? It turned out that Chen was quite right. I'd have bet money against him, but he was spot-on correct in his prediction. Every single item of information known to the human race was in those banks, waiting for me to call it out. All I needed to know were the correct access codes — the series of digital strings and pointers, leading the inquiry from one data bank to the next.

Simple, you say? That's what I thought. Then it turned out that there was a hidden symmetry and structure to the systems of lists and markers, a natural hierarchy that made recall simple and fast. Without an understanding of that underlying form, access to the banks was marginally possible, but it took ages and it was unreliable.

I could not, try as I might, grasp that structure. I worked at it until I was cursing myself and bursting with frustration. It did no good. I got nowhere. I could find my way into certain data banks, almost at random, but I couldn't work the system as it was supposed to be worked.

After twelve hours I recalled a melancholy fact about the human brain. If a person does not learn to speak by a certain age, that person will *never*

speak properly — no matter how long and hard he tries. The data-bank system seemed to be like that. You acquired the understanding by a certain age, or you were forever on the outside, peering in.

I tried all night long. By morning I had a lot more general facts about the world I was in, but no success with the system.

What was this new world like? I could perceive it only dimly, though maybe that would change with more exposure. I did not try to understand how it derived from the world I knew. As I've said many times, history doesn't know how to plot worth a damn. If you look at the events that lead up to a major change in the world, they're too improbable for any rational person to accept. The human race goes rolling and staggering on into the future, with no more idea of the path than a drunken duchess.

Some things were clear. We had the Solar System, twenty billion humans spread across the face of it and running things the way they wanted to. We had the stars, too. That was nice. I'd missed badly on one thing there. I had assumed that when everyone was linked into the central data banks, they wouldn't want to go too far from home because the light-speed limit would make them lose contact with almost everything they knew. Plausible — but the light-speed limit had been one of the first things to go. Hell, if I'd hung on for a few more years, I'd have seen it myself.

But still no aliens on the scene. And no signals from anyone out there, to show we're not the only game in town. Lots of good science fiction went down the tubes on that one.

When Chen called back, I was pretty tired. He hadn't told me what the limits of my modified body would be, but I thought I might as well find out for myself. After twenty-four hours without sleep (or alcohol; the food supply system refused to give it to me), I felt as though I could use a twenty-minute nap. No more than that.

He called before he came, sending me a message through the terminal. I guess anybody who was wired into the system would get it direct, brain-to-brain, but I couldn't qualify.

"Is there anything that I can bring you?" he said. "Anything you need?"

"Not a thing. Come on over."

He disconnected. If he was curious to know what progress I had made, he didn't show it.

My old convention outfit had been delivered while I was working on the terminal. It had been superbly preserved. I put on the formal clothes,

the ruffled shirt, the scarlet sash, the black patent leather shoes. Then the cuff links, the ring, and the diamond stickpin. Finally I lay down for the twenty-minute nap before Chen arrived. I wanted to be fresh and alert.

WHEN HE came into the room, I was carefully winding my fob watch. So far as I am concerned, wristwatches and digital watches are two backward steps for the human race. There's no sound on earth more satisfying than the ticking of a decent-sized pocket watch, and no weight that hefts more naturally and comfortably in the hand.

Chen stared at the watch on its long golden chain. "A clockwork watch? Worked by a spring?"

"That's right. If I'm obsolete, I might as well have obsolete technology to match."

I set the time on it, closed the case, and lifted it up by its long chain. "All done," I said. "Now I can face the future." *And apply a few obsolete skills.*

Chen was watching me with an expression of pity. He seemed like a really nice guy. No doubt about it, the human race had come a long way in two hundred years. Somewhere on that winding road to tomorrow, the viciousness and insensitivity had disappeared — maybe because it's hard to ignore how others are feeling when you have mind-to-mind contact.

Whatever had made the difference to the way people felt, Chen was pretty miserable when he sat down across from me. I didn't need to tell him that I couldn't work the data banks the way he could. He *knew*. Too many others had tried and failed.

I nodded at him. "You were quite right. I can *learn* the pointers and lists. But I can't get the hang of *manipulating* them efficiently."

He nodded. "I was convinced that would prove to be the case. You are ready, then, to join the others who were revived? I know that you will have a pleasant and tranquil life."

"I'm not quite ready for that yet." I leaned back a little in my chair. This took concentration. I had read about it a dozen times, and I knew exactly how it was done; but this was only the second time I had tried it.

"You know, Chen," I went on, "when you've lived as long as I have, and read as much as I have, and done as many things as I've done, you find it hard to accept the idea that one of those things somehow wouldn't prove

useful. Even today, in a world that's so different from the one that I knew, you think there must be *something* you know or do that will have value. I can't get that idea out of my mind. Most of my skills are obsolete today, but isn't there some little talent or piece of know-how that might still have value? I had an experience not too different from that, fifty — make that 250, I guess — years ago, when I was on a trip to Mexico. I'd been staying in this little town, where the only safe thing to drink was the beer. And I didn't really know where my next meal was coming from. . . ."

He humored me, allowing me to wind on through my slow and soft-spoken tale. I didn't hurry. I didn't once raise my voice. He listened patiently. He must have thought that it was the least the new age could do for the old, giving me a hearing before they dumped me into the old folks' home and forgot about us.

All the time I talked, I was sitting with my eyes fixed on his, casually holding that old silver watch on its chain of gold links, and swinging it back and forth in front of him.

Five minutes, and his mouth was open. Ten minutes, and his eyes were glassy. He was gone. I put the watch back into my pocket. Interesting, what you pick up in a misspent lifetime.

"Stand up, Chen."

He rose to his feet and looked quietly down at me.

"Very good," I said. "Now, Chen, I want to know the names of the parents of the Emperor Claudius, of the Roman Empire."

A split-second pause. "Dursus; and Antonia."

"Right. And what were the names of the operas that Mozart composed in 1781 and 1782?"

"*Idomoneo*, and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*." He stumbled over the words.

"Good enough. Now we want something a little more complicated. But don't begin at once. Wait until I say the word '*Idomoneo*.' All right?" I put my hand on his shoulder in a friendly fashion. "First, Chen, we are going to need the entry points into the data banks that control world communications, transportation, and food supply. We particularly need to locate the major nodes, the places that permit complete system control. Understand?"

He nodded.

"Good. And while you are at it, Chen, I want you to link me through to the place where the *other* science fiction writer is living. I'll need to visit

her and talk to her. We have a lot of plans to make. But first, though, you'll bring all the food, transportation, and communication data up for display on my screen. *Idomoneo*."

It took him a minute or two this time. I stayed calm. We were in no particular rush, and we had to do it right. I leaned back, swung my watch on its chain, and wondered about those ten biographies of me. Had any of them been *really* honest — honest enough to say that I was an ornery son of a bitch? Probably not.

Chen was holding his head at last, and the data I wanted came flowing out onto the screen. All the Solar System critical modes were identified, every nexus from Vulcan to the Oort Cloud. I put Chen into a deeper sleep while I settled down to study them. After a few minutes I touched the first key, one that began to take over surreptitious control of the food supply lines.

Control. That was the key word. Some concepts and skills never become obsolete. I looked again at Chen. From the glaze on him, he was under deeper hypnosis than anyone else I had ever seen. He was my man. One down, twenty billion to go.

Ten lousy biographies? I'd change that, one way or another.



"I believe we all agree that the secret of investment success relies heavily on our ability to know what's going to happen before it happens, which brings me to our new board member, Madam Valesty."

Many of George Alec Effinger's stories provide offbeat and mordant twists to the classic themes of SF. Take the story below, of which Mr. Effinger says: "I've been thinking about the morality in lots of old SF books, the ones that kill off masses of people in parallel universes in an offhand way, because they're not 'real'; they don't come from 'our' universe so they don't count. . ."

Another Dead Grandfather

By George Alec Effinger

JOHNNY CARANCINO DIDN'T believe in fantasy, and he didn't believe in science fiction, either. He was a realist. When some girl told him she never wanted to see him again, he nodded his head and said, "I knew it was going to end up like this." He acted as if life had little mystery, that there were no surprises he wasn't prepared for. When the IRS called him in for an audit, he just shrugged and said, "It figures." When he had to have his gallbladder out, he sighed and said, "Just my luck." When the heat went out in his apartment and he was trying to keep warm by turning up the oven and leaving it open, his cat, Treachery, jumped into it and burned herself. Carancino was moved to sadness, but he knew that things like that occurred all the time. He rarely got excited, because he knew that his life was just like everybody else's. The good and the bad things that happened were neither rewards nor punishments.

So when a bright orange glow roused him from sleep and an inconsistent erotic dream, he was at a loss to put the experience into proper

perspective. He propped his head up with the pillow and watched the fiery ball get larger and larger. Flowing colors swirled in the flickering luminescence, and Carancino thought he heard faint murmuring voices and a distant music like the muted score of an old MGM biblical epic. The blazing light licked like flames at the walls, and turned his old bedroom furniture golden in the eerie gleam. He smelled a sharp odor that reminded him of the gaseous envelope that surrounds an oil refinery on a hot summer day. The orange sphere grew from the size of a beach ball until it stood at the foot of his bed, throbbing and shimmering, and brushed the bent brass arms of the ceiling light fixture.

"Perhaps," thought Carancino, "perhaps this is a rarely observed phenomenon that nevertheless has been noted by scientific observers throughout the ages. Like Saint Elmo's fire or Saint Vitus' dance. It may be merely an unusual trick of refraction or reflection, maybe some car's powerful headlights bouncing off an unknown object and creating a freak effect here in my room. I could take it as an indication that the fortuitous positioning of my personal belongings has set up a strange field of natural forces, magnetic or gravitational in origin and of greater intensity than is usually encountered outside the laboratory. Or else my chifforobe, for instance, may be badly in need of degaussing." Whatever the true source of the spinning, thrumming globe of fire, Carancino was not afraid of it. It had to have a simple explanation, so therefore he might as well go back to sleep.

But he didn't go back to sleep. He watched as the churning ball suddenly froze in midair. The low-pitched vibration stopped, too, and the strong chemical stink began to dissipate. The orange flares cooled and dimmed, until the ball had become merely a soft, pearly haze that drifted between the bedposts and the desert beige chest of drawers. "Already the thing's great energies are consuming themselves," Carancino noted. "Soon, like a dying sun, there will be little left but a sullen, cold aura to mark its former glory, and then nothing."

He watched with some regret as the pale luminosity faded even as he'd predicted. But before the light disappeared entirely, the deep growling vibration returned, getting louder and more rapid by the second. There was a threatening quality to the noise. Carancino's gaze moved quickly around the bedroom, searching for the source of the sound; but he saw nothing. Then, suddenly, there was something else in the place where the orange globe had been.

There were a man and a woman. The woman saw Carancino's astonished expression and laughed. "We're back!" she called gaily.

"Who are you?" asked Carancino in a quavery voice. He *knew* there was a logical explanation for this.

The man and the woman looked at each other in bewilderment. Then the woman made a little embarrassed grimace. "We had such a good time tomorrow that we just forgot."

"Who *are* you?" said Carancino in a louder voice. Even the fact that there was a rational basis to all this did not prevent him from being modestly afraid.

The woman's smile disappeared. She smoothed her long, lank, white hair with one hand and straightened up. She was wearing a dull black one-piece garment with white boots and gauntlets. There was a diamond-shaped emblem on her left breast. The man, who hadn't yet said anything or even changed expression, was wearing the same uniform. "My name," she said "is Eldrè s."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Johnny Carancino."

"We know that," said Eldrè s. Her voice was soft and husky. She pronounced her words with an odd accent, something thick and strange in the vowels, as if she'd learned English in a place where native speakers were rare.

"How did you get into my bedroom?" Carancino was still huddled beneath his sheets, wearing pale green flannel pajamas.

"We just . . . aimed ourselves," said Eldrè s. It appeared that her companion was satisfied to let her do all the talking.

"Uh-huh," said Carancino. "Where did you come from?"

For the first time, Eldrè s looked impatient. "This is such an obligatory conversation," she complained. "I'd be grateful if you'd just accept the idea as fast as you can. See, we're visitors from the future."

"Time travelers?" said Carancino, his eyes opening wide. Yes, here was the rational explanation, all right.

"Of course, time travelers! Got it? I'm from an era hundreds of years down the line. Your world is to me what the Middle Ages are to you. I'm here on kind of a vacation. I'm not going to tell you anything about the future; nothing you can use, anyway. I'm not going to solve any of your problems, personal or otherwise. I'm not going to give you a gift of our vastly superior technology. None of that stuff. Understand? I'm here be-

cause I needed a break. This is *my* vacation, and you're going to entertain *me*."

"What do you mean?"

Eldrē s stepped closer and perched on the foot of the bed. Her hands moved idly back and forth across the blanket, as if she'd never felt anything like it before. "Be hospitable, John. Think of yourself as an average citizen, a representative of your culture. What would you do if you came upon some poor foreigner wandering around your streets, unable to speak the language very well, unfamiliar with your customs? I think you'd try to help him out. *Some* people wouldn't, but I think you're not going to throw us out and make us try again with someone else. The sooner you catch on and start giving us what we want, the sooner we can all have a good time and get the hell out of here."

Carancino chewed his lip. His eyes narrowed. "You said we had a good time tomorrow. What does that mean?"

Eldrē s shrugged. "It means that this isn't the first time we've met. First time for you, not for me and Jimmy." She indicated the silent young man. "We came back to your time and arrived tomorrow evening. The three of us went places and had a lot of fun. You said you had to get up early, so we went home and came back today. A day before we meet you tomorrow night."

"Why? Why did you come back a day earlier?"

Eldrē s looked impatient again. "Why the hell not?" she cried. "Because we goddamn *felt* like it, *that's* why. We're from the goddamn future, sweetheart, and we don't need your approval."

Carancino was taken aback by her vehemence. "O.K.," he said, "whatever you want."

"Damn straight about *that*," said Eldrē s. "Now look here. We were thinking of taking you along with us. We're going back in time even farther, and we'll pay a visit to anybody in the past you'd like to meet. What do you think about dropping in on Cleopatra or Napoleon? Tonight you're our guest. You can have the run of human history to play in. You name it. Solve some perplexing mystery of the ages, or see Helen of Troy with her clothes off — whatever bubbles your blood."

"Damn," said Carancino, "it sounds like fun. What's the catch?"

"Catch?" Eldrē s glanced at the silent Jimmy.

"Why me? What do you need me for? What's it going to cost?"

Eldr  s showed her temper again. "Need you? What the hell makes you think we *need* you? We're just being friendly. We're just returning a favor. You showed us such a good time tomorrow night that we figured it was our turn to treat you. *Goddamn*, they grew them stupid in this century. I mean, if you're going to be *that* way about it, just forget it. Jimmy and I can fade on out of here and let you get back to sleep. I'm sorry if we caused you any inconvenience, you self-centered chucklehead. I think we'll go materialize in President Kennedy's bedroom and let him know what he can look forward to. Maybe he'll pay attention and give Dealey Plaza a miss."

Carancino was astonished. "But that's got to be impossible," he said. He was still very naive about time travel. "You couldn't warn him. Or, at least, if you *did* warn him, it wouldn't change anything. President Kennedy was shot, and nothing can change that." He looked from Eldr  s to Jimmy. "Can it?"

Eldr  s just gave him an amused smile.

Carancino got out of bed. He felt like a fool, confronting intelligences from the future while dressed in flannel pajamas. "You can't really change the past, can you?" he asked.

"Well now," said Eldr  s. "The twentieth-century skeptic begins to entertain the notion. You're witnessing a historic event, Jimmy, a milestone in man's slow rise from savagery. John, surely you've heard of the Grandfather Paradox."

He squinted, as if that might help him remember. "No," he said, "I don't think so. Is it like the four-color map problem?"

Eldr  s sighed. "Only superficially. The Grandfather Paradox was one of the first questions that needed to be answered when time travel was first developed. Suppose someone goes back and murders his grandfather before the ancestor fathered the parent of the murderer. How could the murderer exist? If he doesn't exist, how could he go back to commit the murder? If the murder doesn't happen, how could the murderer *not* exist, after all?"

"I give," said Carancino. "How?"

"Jimmy, just give him the outfit." The quiet young man handed Carancino a black uniform just like his own, complete with white boots and gauntlets. "Now," said Eldr  s, after Carancino had put on the clothes, "you look like one of us. You *aren't* one of us, but you look like one. That's all that matters when you go back into the past. It's a good idea to make a

splashy first impression. You remember how we arrived here."

"Impressive," agreed Carancino. "That rumbling ball of fire and all."

"Could've blipped in quiet as a mouse, if we'd wanted. Those special effects were just for your benefit. They're expensive, you know, but how often do I get a vacation like this? The fire and fog and weird sounds I ordered out of a catalog, just to get your attention."

"They worked. I think they scorched my rug, though."

"The hell with your rug. This is the highlight of your drab life, John. I want to jolt you out of your torpid sloth. I want you open to new ideas, new possibilities. You're not going to be any fun if you cling to your twentieth-century fuddies. What do you say?"

Carancino was regarding his reflection in the chifforobe's mirror. The black and white costume made him look kind of sleek and heroic — he had to admit that. He squinted his eyes a little and set his jaw: Johnny Carancino, Time Ranger.

"What do you say, John?" Eldrè s asked again.

"What? Huh?"

She looked over at Jimmy, closed her eyes, and let out an exasperated sigh. "Dress him up in an outfit any paramilitary nut group would go crazy for, offer him a tug of time's forelock, and he stands around with his thumb in his ear. Do you need some kind of special encouragement before you put on your dancing shoes, John? Drugs? Electric shock? Threat of bodily harm? What?"

"I'm all set," Carancino announced. "Where we off to?"

Eldrè s gave him a broad, mostly insincere smile, the kind you give a total jerk who's just figured out something bitterly obvious. "You're going to decide, John. We're going to let you have first choice, then we'll go. You lead off, though. Just name any time and place you'd like to visit."

"Can I go into the future? Can I see what your world is like?"

"No, nobody can go into his own future. Technical reasons, too dumb to go into now. I'm sure you understand. But you've got millions of good beachfront years to choose from, some of them very well spoken of, very attractive. Forget cost; it's on me tonight. Just name a year."

Carancino shook his head. "Pardon me, but doesn't it seem like we're entering into some kind of paradox here? I mean, what if—"

Eldrè s screamed at him. "Of course we're entering a goddamn paradox! That's what the whole goddamn thing's about! Paradoxes, time travel, meet-

ing yourself coming and going! Goddamn, John!"

"O.K., don't get mad. I want to go back to 1876. I want to meet General Custer."

Eldr  s gave him a blank look, then shrugged her shoulders. "Moderate to poor on the Grin-O-Meter, man. We're definitely going to have to show you how to lighten up a little and get loose. You sure now?"

"Yeah, I'm sure, I guess. What do we do? You got a machine or something?"

"Sort of. We all join hands."

He frowned. "We join hands? Like a s ance? I expected chrome and glass and flashing lights."

"We already did that," said Eldr  s. "I told you, that part isn't necessary."

"Then how do we go back in time?" asked Carancino.

"We join hands, like a s ance," she told him. "Here's a little wisdom from the future for you to keep in mind: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from double-talk. You ready?"

"Steady as she goes," said Carancino.

Eldr  s glanced at Jimmy, who nodded. Carancino didn't know what to expect. He watched Eldr  s take a few deep breaths. Her eyes shut in concentration; then she jabbed her index finger at the diamond-shaped emblem on her breast. The three adventurers joined hands. "The fourth dimension, John," she murmured. "Mystery, wonder, things that cannot be. Do you feel it?"

"No," he admitted, "not yet."

The transition wasn't all that exciting. First, Carancino saw white rings flickering in the upper right corner of his vision, just like when the film reel ran out at the theater. Then he was suddenly out beneath an overcast night sky, on a grassy plain beside rapidly flowing water. About fifty yards away was a group of tents. A lantern hung on the largest, and a dozen uniformed men stood in a half circle in the yellow, flickering light.

"Listen," whispered Eldr  s.

Behind him, Carancino heard men's voices and the complaints of horses and mules. He heard all the sounds of a large encampment busy settling in for the evening meal. Not far away he heard the unconcerned gurgling of Rosebud Creek. A filthy, grizzled man with gray hair and a tangled beard touched Carancino on the arm. "Here," he said, "take this."

"Take what?" asked Carancino.

"A pair of shirts, one of 'em clean. I won't be needing them. Not after tomorrow. And I got some tobacco you can have."

"That's all right," said Carancino, stepping away from the old man. "I don't use tobacco."

"I won't, either. Not after tomorrow." The scout scuttled off into the gloom. Carancino stared after him and shivered.

"Listen," Eldr s said again.

The men standing before the large tent, officers, began to serenade General Custer. "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow!" the doomed men sang. "Praise God, all creatures here below! Praise Him above, ye heavenly host! Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!"

When they finished, Custer shifted uncomfortably in his canvas chair. He nodded to his subordinates. They took up another song, "Annie Laurie." Eldr s, Jimmy, and Carancino stood hidden in the shadows while the officers sang another few tunes. Then the soldiers saluted and dispersed to their own quarters. Custer stood and stretched his arms to the sky. His orderly carried the canvas chair inside, then came back out and let down the tent flaps. A moment later the orderly saluted and went away. Custer disappeared inside his tent.

"Now," said Eldr s. "Now you can go have your talk with the bastard."

Carancino felt a cold chill rush through him. He didn't want to talk with Custer. He didn't have anything to say to the man. He hadn't had time to accept that it would truly be possible. Now he was completely unnerved. "I've seen enough," he said in a shaky voice.

Eldr s scoffed. "Tomorrow night you were so much fun. Tonight you're Mr. Spoiler of Sport. Unbuckle, John, or we'll leave you here. You can end up a puzzling skeleton for the historians of your own time."

Carancino's eyes got wider. "Don't even joke about it," he said. He wasn't sure that she was joking, but that was the way he'd rather interpret it. "Give me a minute. I'll duck into the tent. Maybe Custer will think I'm one of his aides or something. I would like to know what his plan is. There are plenty of arguments about why he did some of the things he did."

Eldr s patted him on the shoulder. "That's the spirit, John. You've got to stop being so timid and lame. You can't get in trouble when you travel in time — hasn't anybody ever told you that? Who's going to catch you? Hey, you can do anything you want. If you've ever had a horrible, secret desire, now's your chance. This uniform gives you *freedom*, John."

It was remarkable how readily the 19th century soldier accepted the idea of time travel.

"That's scary," he said softly.

"Sure," said Eldr s, smiling, "but it's scary only for everyone else, not for us. I promise you, by the end of this evening, you won't be scared anymore. Now let's go talk to George."

Carancino entered Custer's tent. The general had his back turned, facing a small folding table and gazing at an antique silver picture frame. He was wearing a long buckskin jacket, but he had already removed his boots and buckskin trousers. It was very quiet in the tent. Carancino smelled the sharp tang of cinnamon, from the pomade Custer wore on his curly blond hair. The general was humming "Garry Owen," the Seventh Cavalry's regimental tune. Carancino cleared his throat. "Excuse me, General Custer?"

Custer turned slowly and regarded him, his lips pursed. He placed the picture frame back on the table. "My dear wife, Libbie," he said sadly. "I may never see her again. I suppose."

Carancino took another step forward. "I can't explain who I am or where I come from—"

Custer raised a hand tiredly. "You're from the future. For the past twelve hours, every time I have a minute to myself, one of you people from the future sticks his head in. Will I get some rest soon? When will you stop annoying me?"

"You've had other visitors?"

"Yes, yes. From the future. Just like you." Custer turned his head and spat.

"Dressed like me?" In this outfit?"

"Close enough."

It was remarkable how readily the nineteenth-century soldier accepted the idea of time travel. No doubt Custer had had less trouble believing it than Carancino himself. "Then probably someone has already told you—"

"That I and all my men will be massacred tomorrow afternoon. That Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Gall are waiting across the Little Bighorn, that the Indian force is many times greater than my scouts have estimated. Yes, I've heard all that."

"You seem to have accepted the news calmly," said Carancino, surprised.

Custer gave him a brief smile. "I was educated at West Point, and I got a further education at Bull Run and Gettysburg. I've learned this, young man: when you're presented with indisputable facts, don't waste your time disputing them."

"Yet you're going down into that valley tomorrow anyway?"

Custer laughed, long and hard. "I wonder what you future people think we poor fools in the past did for brains! I'm not crazy, son, at least, not by army standards. I had planned to attack that village, it's true. I thought it was a small encampment of Oglala Sioux, mostly women and children, their men away hunting. I thought it would be easy enough to take. Now that I know differently, I've made a change in my timetable. I'll do as I was ordered and wait for Gibbon's and Crook's columns to join up with me."

So it would be an entirely different battle, and Custer might yet emerge from it a conquering hero. Thanks to the interference from the curious time travelers, Custer had decided against making his impetuous and fatal attack.

"Are you satisfied now, young man?" asked Custer. "It's late, you know, and I've had a hard day in the saddle."

"Yes, certainly, sir. I'm sorry." Carancino began backing out of the tent. "One thing more, though."

Custer's expression grew impatient. "Well?"

"The theory in my time is that you hurried and rode down on the Indians before Gibbon and Crook arrived, because you thought a dramatic victory would get you the Democratic nomination for president. Is that true? Were you prepared to sacrifice your men for your political ambition?"

"I'll tell you what I told the others," said Custer, closing one eye and nodding. "The real reason is that tomorrow's June 25, and the country's celebrating its Centennial in Philadelphia on the Fourth of July. I and a few of my officers kind of wanted to be there for the opening ceremonies."

Carancino just stared, unsure whether to believe him or not. Could the entire Seventh Cavalry have been wiped out on the basis of such a trivial whim? Before he could say anything further, Carancino was pushed aside by Eldr s. She grabbed the framed picture of Custer's wife and threw it to the ground. The glass broke with a single tinkling crunch. "You son of a bitch!" Eldr s cried. "You goddamn psycho son of a bitch!"

Custer was kneeling in his long underwear, turning the silver frame

over. He raised his head and glared at Eldr  s. He rose up slowly, his brows drawn in a rage so fierce that he looked as if he might kill Eldr  s where she stood. "Burkman!" shouted Custer. "Burkman, come in here immediately!"

"We've got to get out of here," said Carancino, taking Eldr  s by the arm.

"Why? I'm not afraid of him," she said. She pulled free of his grasp. "General Custer, if you want to commit suicide, you just go ahead. But taking two hundred young men with you, that's evil. You're no martyr, not to the people of my time. You're the worst kind of low-minded glory hunter, the kind that doesn't care how many innocent lives it spends to get what it wants. For a while, people thought you were a hero. Then you were a madman, or a fool; but where I come from, pony boy, you're a *criminal*."

Custer's orderly came into the tent. He stopped short, staring in astonishment at the time travelers. "Where—"

"Get them out of here, Burkman!" Custer said in tight, controlled voice. "Use a squad of riflemen if you have to. Escort them to the perimeter, and make sure they don't come back. Let them deal with the Sioux as best they can."

"Yes, sir," said Burkman. He glanced from Carancino to Eldr  s to Jimmy, who hadn't stirred or said a word since they interrupted Custer in his tent.

"We'll go," said Eldr  s, still seething. She grabbed Carancino roughly by the wrist and reached out her other hand to Jimmy. In a moment there was the same quick transition, and Carancino saw that he was no longer in the general's tent. It was no longer night. They were standing in a cobbled street. Birds twittered in a tree nearby, and the sky was a bright blue. "Welcome to Vienna," said Eldr  s.

Carancino looked up and down the street, but they were alone. He was having a little trouble adjusting to the vanishings in and out of places and times. It was still too much of a miracle for him. "Where are we?" he asked.

"Vienna," said Eldr  s.

"I know; you told me that. I mean, what year is it?"

"Eighteen twenty. We are standing before the house of Franz Schubert."

Carancino's eyebrows went up. "Some contrast with Custer. Listen, I don't speak Austrian, you know. Do you have some kind of universal translator with you or something?"

"No," said Eldr s, "but I myself have a moderate command of the language. I'll be happy to tell Herr Schubert whatever you want. Shall we?" She indicated the house, and Carancino nodded. They went up to the door and were met by a young woman. Eldr s spoke to her for a moment, and evidently satisfied her. They were shown into Schubert's study.

Carancino leaned closer to Eldr s. "I'm still shuddering over the way you attacked Custer," he whispered.

"I was waiting for you to do it. You're the one who wanted to go back to see him. I didn't think that I'd have to take him down myself. Your moral courage compartment is getting empty, John."

"That was George Armstrong Custer! What did you expect me to do, box the man's ears?"

Eldr s waved impatiently. "You're too dazzled by these time celebrities. Mostly they're nobodies, John. Custer had luck — for a while. That's all. He never made any worthwhile contribution to civilization. Schubert, now, had talent. He's a very different kind of man. Even so, I don't want you fawning all over him and telling him how much you like his music and everything. If you do, I swear I'll never take you anyplace else, ever again."

"I'll do my best," said Carancino. "Now, what does it mean that we walked in on Custer and let him know what would happen at the Little Bighorn? It looks like we changed history."

Eldr s glanced around to see if there was any sign of Franz Schubert, but the three time travelers were still alone in the study. "I can't give you a whole course in chronics right now," she said. "But do you know how a subatomic particle can suddenly come into existence, thanks to the quantum mechanical flux? For a brief instant it borrows life, thanks to the Heisenberg equations, and flickers out again. Well, in my time, we've learned to manipulate units of time in much the same way. It's like re-stringing beads on a string. We just shuffle some beads from the past into the present. After a short interval, it's paid back. Do you follow?"

"No."

Eldr s shrugged. "Indistinguishable from double-talk. I warned you about that."

"Then when you change the past—"

"You change a bead here or there, but the rest of the string stays the same. In the future, you'll always be able to read about Custer's Last Stand.

Even if you went back and supplied the general with tactical nuclear weapons."

"Guten Morgen," said Franz Schubert. He came into the study, licking the last of his breakfast from his thumb and fingers. He invited them to be seated.

Eldr s smiled and glanced around the room. The composer was not wealthy, and he did not have a lavish home, but it was comfortable and pleasant. She introduced herself, and Schubert bowed. She pointed to Jimmy, who nodded, and to Carancino, who half rose from his seat, one hand extended. Eldr s glared at him, and he sat back down. She said something else, and Schubert shook his head shyly; Eldr s insisted. At last Schubert shrugged; he got up and went across the room to a piano. He shuffled through some sheet music and selected a manuscript. Carancino felt privileged to hear one of history's greatest musicians perform something he'd written. Schubert began to sing. Carancino decided that the man's fortune was definitely in the composing end of the business: Schubert's voice was, to be charitable, limited in range and expression.

When Schubert finished the *Lied*, he turned to his guests. Carancino began to applaud, but once again he was cut off by a sharp look from Eldr s. The woman from the future stood up and went to the piano. She murmured something in Schubert's ear, but didn't bother to translate for Jimmy and Carancino. Schubert looked astonished. He began to play another piece. This time it was Eldr s who sang. She did rather well with the song, giving Schubert's second *Lied* a haunted, yearning quality the composer may well have intended. When the music ended, Jimmy just sat in his chair, yawning, and Carancino almost started clapping again. Schubert said something in a puzzled tone of voice. "He's a little confused," explained Eldr s, "because he just finished writing that song last night. He wants me to explain how I know it."

She turned to Schubert again and put one hand on the great man's shoulder. She glanced back at Carancino, as if making sure that he was watching. Then she slapped Schubert with the back of her other hand. Carancino let out a surprised yelp. Eldr s continued to strike the composer with regular, measured blows, forehand and backhand. Schubert protested and tried to back away, but Eldr s only laughed. She drove the stiff fingers of her right hand into his abdomen just below the sternum, and Schubert doubled over, gasping for breath. "Goddamn syphilitic son of

a bitch," grunted Eldr s. She brought her knee up and caught him on the point of the chin, sending him over backward.

"Eldr s!" cried Carancino. Jimmy grabbed his arm, preventing him from going to Schubert's aid.

"This guy thinks he's a big deal," she said, breathing heavily. She helped the composer up, then chopped down at his neck on either side of his head. There was the sickening sound of bones creaking. Schubert fell to the faded, figured rug. Eldr s kicked him once in the belly, once in the head. "That's the trouble with *all* these bastards."

"What the hell are you *doing*?" demanded Carancino. Jimmy had him in a bear hug now, helpless.

"What does it *look* like I'm doing?" she said. She gave him a ferocious grin. "I'm beating this immortal musician to a goddamn bloody *pulp*, and loving every second of it!" She kicked again. Schubert pulled himself into a ball, but he was still vulnerable.

"That's enough," said Carancino, thoroughly disgusted. "Is *this* what you do when you go into the past? You get your thrills brutalizing famous people?"

"Something like that," said Eldr s. "I like to vandalize ancient treasures, too. You have an objection?"

"I think I just want to go home now."

Eldr s shook her head. "Not yet." She gestured to Jimmy. "I think we'll do it now," she said.

"Do what?" asked Carancino.

Jimmy released his arms, and Carancino stepped away from him. Jimmy reached into his tunic and pulled out a small nickel-plated automatic pistol. "Hurting Schubert like this doesn't mean anything," said Eldr s. "It never really happened. You won't find any record of it. You see, when you take a bead of time out of its natural order, in a way you're creating a new little pocket universe. You can be God in that universe. You can kill and maim and burn cities, whatever you can imagine, but it affects only that bead, nothing else. So what's the harm? I mean, morally speaking, what real significance does it have? In one sense, this isn't the real Franz Schubert here." She gave him another kick in the belly. Carancino could see a bright line of blood flowing from the man's mouth. "The people in the beads are like dummies or androids. They don't really count."

"They don't really count," said Carancino in a dull voice. He could see

Schubert's agony. It looked real enough to him.

"The Schubert in the next bead won't remember anything about what we did here. We touched only this one isolated bead. It never happened, it doesn't count, we've broken no laws, and we haven't actually hurt anyone. My conscience doesn't bother me at all. See?"

"Sure," said Carancino. He knew that Eldrè s was crazy. He wasn't going to disagree with her. He just wished he'd never met her.

"Jimmy," she said. The young man moved closer to Carancino, and raised the pistol threateningly.

"What does *this* mean?" asked Carancino.

"The Grandfather Paradox," said Eldrè s. "We've been playing around with it, with Custer and Schubert. Now you're the grandfather. Five years from now, John, you're going to marry a young woman by the name of Eleanore. Your son, John Jr., will marry a girl named Catherine. Their kid—your grandson—will be Jimmy. You're Jimmy's grandfather. This is all true, you know. Jimmy wanted to see what would happen if he *did* kill his grandfather. Go ahead, Jimmy, kill him."

Carancino felt cold terror. "Wait! It might not affect Jimmy, because—"

"Because to him you're just a bead," said Eldrè s. "That's right."

"But I'm not just a bead to *me*," objected Carancino. He waved a hand, indicating Schubert's study. "This is the past, but as far as I'm concerned, this moment is my present. If you kill me—"

"You'll be dead," said Eldrè s. "That's right. But in the future the subsequent beads will go on as if nothing happened. So it didn't *really* happen; Jimmy won't really have killed you; it's all just a party game."

"But I'll still be dead! Who's going to return to the twentieth century with you? Where will the Johnny Carancino come from, to take up my life? You shoot me, I'll be dead!"

Eldrè s looked impatient. "There are plenty more of you where you came from," she said. "Shoot him already, Jimmy, and shut him up."

Jimmy raised his pistol and fired three times. Carancino fell to the floor beside Schubert, dead. Jimmy looked at Eldrè s and grinned. He did not wink out of existence. "Take my hand," said Eldrè s, "and let's go home. I want to tell you whose grandfather you are."



Long-time readers will recall Michael Shea's classic SF horror story, "The Autopsy" (*F&SF*, December 1980). Mr. Shea's new story is about pregnancy and childbirth, normally a fairly predictable and happy occasion, but in Mr. Shea's hands, it turns into something quite different . . .

Delivery

By Michael Shea

THE BRAXTON-HICKS, or "practice," contractions experienced by women in the later months of pregnancy were but a moon-cast shadow, painwise, of the real things. Lupe, seizing offhandedly on a comparison, had said: "The Braxtons are like, oh, having a door slammed on your fingers. The real ones are like having a *car* door slammed on your fingers." She rarely urged the details of her pain on Bradley. he had been, a little guiltily, pressing for a rehearsal of a sequence they had already been through — for this was their second.

He had not been in attendance through most of the culminating months of their first. He had done a lot of drinking during his at-home hours, or get-away-from-home hours, as he had increasingly made them. He had gone to the classes, and assisted throughout the delivery, but he had fought off any true inward preparation, had stocked his mind with no clear script for the event, nor any orderly grasp of the mechanisms underlying its phases. He had gone in and, fueled on love and powerless

empathy, been all the help he could, which was little enough for the best prepared.

This time around, he had still been slow to concentrate on the material she gave him to read, but then, this time they knew they could make it through. His resistance bothered both of them less. He, like more and more people nowadays, had come late to parenthood, and a lot of men took their first steps toward it with similar misgivings. He had been drinking a lot less, and had managed a better grasp of the birthing process.

Now, for instance — as he pulled onto the freeway and accelerated toward the bloody-gold dome of afterglow and the city's silhouette against it starred with kindling neon — he knew that with Lupe's contractions coming about five minutes apart, her cervix would be about four centimeters dilated. Through the slick mini-doughnut of her os, which normally, like a delicate little tide-pool polyp, would recoil from his enormous fingertips and cause her to wince, he would now be able to stick his thumb right down to its thickest part. As soon as they got in the car, he had turned on the little beeper provided them by the clinic, and now a State Patrol cruiser slid into the lane ahead of him and set its light rack on the blue-to-red escort pattern.

Big Government had its points. It was postpeak traffic, mostly outbound on the freeway, but still congested on the surface streets to the hospital. The cruiser wedged them laneways through its fissures, prolonged their green lights with its remote override, leaving aneurisms of arrested flow in their wake. The cruiser caused him more fear than comfort, of course. It was the manifested power of the World Population Board, state branch. The government unflaggingly facilitated the whole delivery process — that is, monitored and controlled. Small women carrying large offspring were more likely to get a cesarean section now, under the board, than in the old days. Time limits were stricter — "in the interest of both the mother and child," naturally — and Lupe in her first labor had come very near a mandatory section. She was seven pounds bigger with this one. Second-time mothers, their limbered wombs more compliant to the fetus's growth, often had larger second-borns and faster deliveries as well. Bradley clung to this hope. He didn't want her cut. The sheer bodily invasiveness of reproduction at its simplest was as much as he could rise to. Let her not be cut as well, halved at her core and spread apart.

When they got to the hospital, they found that the Alternate Birth

Centers — with their tape decks, bookshelves, controlled lighting, and king-sized beds — were all taken. They had hoped for these comforts, these bits of sensory latitude into which they could deviate — between contractions — from the inexorable channel of their business here, running always straighter and deeper through pain. Labor. Not misnamed. Every five, three, two minutes reshouldering a toil as impossibly large to the bearer as ants' burdens are.

So they got instead the classic narrow bed with articulating mattress, flightily mobile on its wheels even with the brakes on, poised to speed Lupe wherever developments thrust her. It was parked in the classic narrow room with corner toilet, sink in opposite corner, closet — and nightstands stocked with sterile pads; lubricant packets; boxes of white, condom-thin gloves. There was a kitchenette down the hall, where Bradley could get coffee for him and fresh ice chips for Lupe. Spooning the ice between her red, swollen lips — such fractional aid — came to seem the only solid thing he did for her. During her contractions his baby-powdered hands worked on the small of her back, her buttocks, the soles of her feet where acupressure groin-release points lay. But this handwork seemed pure futility, an impotent chafing intolerable to her the moment her contraction ceased.

Their nurse was a tall woman with large hands and cropped, gray-peppered hair. Her face had a worn country prettiness. She came in several times an hour to take Lupe's blood pressure and temperature, and check the fetal heartbeat, using a small hand unit with digital readout whose tip she applied to Lupe's belly with a smear of lubricant to heighten the minute sound's conduction. She had a remote gentleness. Her smile befriended them from a slight distance, from the other side of labor's absolute parameters, which must finally dictate anything she could do for them. Still, she performed the checks of Lupe's dilation they increasingly asked her for, though the duration and period of the contractions told her, told all three of them, that the womb's opening lingered near six centimeters. Each time, she unwrapped a fresh glove, jellied it with lubricant, reached into Lupe, and probed for the prize they felt she would have liked to find for them, the eight- to nine-centimeter dilation that would open their way to the delivery room, the ordeal's apex and end.

A new nurse came on near midnight. In seven hours, since her water had broken and her contractions had started just before dinnertime, Lupe

Big Government was so tender of the Next Generation . . .

achieved seven centimeters' dilation. The new nurse was small, her bright eyes and arched nose making her bird-faced. There was cheerful pep in her ministrations, her encouragements. Her smiling energy made Bradley's heart sink. It was an omen of Mandatory Procedure coming into play when its moment arrived — brisk, smiling, and unopposable. He sat hunched on the room's one small, straight-backed chair, offered the attending spouse like a mockery of rest, a penance for his powerlessness to share in the bed of pain. In the old days, the not-so-old days, he knew there had been some latitude in the matter of cesareans. But Big Government was so tender of the Next Generation. He smiled bleakly. So tender it slashed with one clean statistical stroke a strict cutoff line through all the variability of maternal makeup. He rose to massage her through another contraction, and felt like a child dabbling uselessly at the brink of a deep pool of anguish.

Ten hours deep in the darkening, sweating tunnel of Lupe's labor, he had come to feel their task as an endless crawl through a fractionally widening tube. The nurse seemed less cruel to him now. He began to feel a clipped compassion in her crispness. She flung, neatly, the sphygmomanometer's pneumatic bandage around Lupe's arm. Her eyes pecked the figures from her watch and the pressure gauge, from the digital thermometer. Then she skinned off and coiled the bandage, her abruptness seeming to confess that its ceaseless application to a part of Lupe that would never bleed declared to plainly medicine's futility at this point. Bradley crawled after his wife through the fractionally widening tunnel — too fractionally — thinking: hours of labor times centimeters of dilation equals C for cesarean. Don't let her be cut. No.

Eleven hours, eight centimeters. A little more perhaps, for it appeared that Lupe's os was swollen. The edematous tissue might be concealing a larger actual aperture — might be fingered aside to let the baby crown. Now, when Lupe was almost past noticing, they learned an Alternate Birth Center had been cleared. These were delivery-equipped, so they moved. Bradley walked beside the wheeled bed, feeling Lupe floating next to him in her unbroken bubble of pain, but feeling hope now, too.

Their doctor joined them, a dark, wiry woman with big black friendly eyes. Bradley chose a tape for the deck with the same pointless care he used in powdering his hands, or spooning the ice. Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Sprightly spring waltzed into the room. The doctor's own greased glove was deep in Lupe now. Yes. Considerable swelling, lots of give. She would try stretching it with her fingers on the next contraction, and Lupe must start to push with all her strength.

They raised a metal leaf bracketed to the bed's foot. It had two stems supporting the stirrups for Lupe's feet, and a central indentation where the doctor stood close to the bleeding birth vent. Bradley was at his wife's shoulders now, and he clenched them at the contractions, giving all he could of counterpressure to the efforts that tore screams from her. He prayed and cursed her and clenched his body like a fist. Like giving body English to a pool shot that has already left the cue stick, he insanely thought, trying to transmit strength to her through the nonconductive medium of their separateness. It had to come now, or they would be cut. It was time and past time. But even as he thought this, he saw that their last chance was already lost.

Another doctor had been called in, a fresh-faced man, ten years Bradley's junior. Their doctor's fingertips had palpated the shape of doubt in Lupe, and now he confirmed it. The fetus was crowning a bit crookedly; the angle would be awkward, given its size. A second nurse came into the room, and apparatuses began to root themselves in Lupe. Electrodes taped to her groin to read out the contractions. A slender, scimitar-curved plastic device inserted in her vagina to monitor the fetal heartbeat. And this, yes . . . unfortunately it was dropping with each contraction now. Not critically, but enough, considering the duration of labor, to make a section mandatory for both mother's and child's sake. Their nurse was already shaving Lupe's groin with an orange liquid soap, foully antiseptic in smell. An I.V. was thrust into the tourniquet-swelled vein of her forearm, its hollow steel visibly thickening the tender blue rope of flesh. A blood sample was taken from her other arm. And Lupe, from deep in the tunnel of her ordeal, had already said: "Yes. All right. I just want it over."

Bradley stared at her, his mind not yet caught up. She lay sprouting tubes and wires everywhere, feeding all the surrounding instrumentation as she had fed with the root work of her womb this infant for all these months. And the doctors and nurses, though busy with this instrumenta-

tion, kept moving their eyes to his. His consent was still missing, a necessary part of the proceedings by law. So he said, hearing his voice waver with his rage:

"They give you a bigger one the second time, don't they? Knowing she's stretched, can just handle it, and if it takes a section, so what? It's policy, isn't it?"

And then they all stood there, Bradley one with them again, contemplating the madness he had just spoken. Their eyes didn't flinch from his, merely watched him, sharp-edged and depthless as the readouts surrounding Lupe and quantifying her agony.

"All right," Bradley said. "But I'm going to be there. In the room with her." Let his useless attendance be entire, right to the end. He thought he would have to argue. Amazingly, when they saw he meant it, they made no obstacle. He would have to be dressed for the operating room.

He rode the elevator down with the young doctor, who took him to the staff changing room. The man's voice was mild, sympathetic. Perhaps he was a little shy of this older layman's uncouth rage against medical necessities. He showed him how to manage the tie strings of the green trousers and smock, the cap and mask. Bradley pulled on the paper slippers, and they stepped out into the corridor. He felt the doctor's youth, his greater distance from the way things had been before. Youth's endless adaptability. It muffled Bradley's outrage in hopelessness. He felt mummied up like a fly in webbing, his movements bulky and whispery in the sterile greens as they walked into the operating room.

Lupe was already there, half a dozen medics around her wheeling up equipment trays, adjusting lights. The anesthesiologist, sitting on a wheeled stool at Lupe's head, looked up bearishly, as at insurrection, when Bradley called out, loud enough to reach her through pain: "I'm right here, baby!" A nurse showed him a line he must stay behind, wheeled a stool near him "in case you want to sit down." He wondered if he would need to, wondered what he would feel. Lupe was out. Her belly was isolated by green drapes above and below, her groin shrouded now, not to be their second-born's exit after all.

They milled around her, their endless business with her incomprehensible, even their repeated spongings and wipings of her belly coming to seem cryptic, incantatory. Then he noticed a figure more stationary than the rest, an older doctor with seamed eye corners and wolfish brows

and a bearded fullness within his mask. He stood between her legs, and as the others' movement stilled and all stood stationed to either side, Bradley saw he held a scalpel, a small silver half coin on a slender handle that showed keenly distinct against the pink planet of Lupe's belly. It hovered there a moment, there was a murmur of masked voices, and then it drew a long line — smoothly as a felt-tip on fresh paper — across her swollen groin. The red line yawned open as it grew, and at the same time, startlingly, blossomed along its length with yellow blooms of subcutaneous fat, like two rows of pneumatic lace instantly inflating, popping up to trim the gaping slash.

This devilwork on the living planet, it proceeded with an eerie alternation of finesse and ragged violence. Layers of ligaments, white gauze, interleaved the red meat of Lupe, and through these, shockingly, the doctor tore, his hands shredding the tough film to either side with evident effort and exactly the elbows-out abruptness of a man ripping rags. Then another careful phase, a similar spreading-aside, but this time studied, painstaking, as the nurses helped the doctor's fingers prize apart the braided meat of abdominal muscle. Bradley knew that this harmonized with the "bikini cut" Lupe had received, an accommodation of technique to postoperative quality of life. No major muscle sliced, Lupe renewed and active again in six weeks, cavorting carefree in a bright bikini that revealed no scar. He wanted to spit, to roar, to swing a sledgehammer against these lights, these readouts. More white gauze now, shredded aside. And then the doctor, with digging hands, was pulling up some deep shape out of hers, clamps and helping hands tugging to widen the vent for this examination.

It was a football shape, one end still deep and anchored, its raised end flattened, tipped with a distended annulus of muscle that mouthed a plug of dark, wet hair. The double door by which Bradley had entered the room opened. Two state troopers, masked and gloved, wheeled in a cart that bore a glass box, warmly lit within. They stood flanking it, just inside the door.

The doctor's fingers were wedged in the os now, gripping the hair plug. Briefly, Lupe's womb seemed to recoil, to be at tug-of-war with him, and then it surrendered with a peristaltic shudder, and the slick mass of their second-born was uprooted — the crooked black legs, bunched like bananas below the bristly abdominal bulb, plucked free. The doctor carried it to the troopers' cart.

One of them opened the glass box's trap, and the doctor eased it through. It poured off his cupped palms and scuttled around its bright, warm crib, pedipalps caressing the glass, so brisk and fully expert in its life's first moments. Its palps cleaned its fangs, and its hindmost legs groomed the tactile hairs of its abdomen. The doctor scarcely needed to check the cart's readouts — all its functions were so plainly perfect. The troopers wheeled it out — their van would be waiting outside to take it down to the Federal Building's new annex.

Bradley looked over to Lupe. Her womb had been tucked back in place. They were already suturing her, webbing her shut again. The doctor was looking at him. In the creases round the friendly wolfish eyes above the mask, he saw a tired strength, a strength burdened with and yet still buoyant under a habitual concession to pain, to horror.

"That's your second, isn't it?" The voice was gravelly, calm. "So now you can have two of your own."

Just the moment before, Bradley had felt himself wombed with a deep and absolute negative that had grown within him through the past half hour, and it seemed to him, until just this instant, that no affirmative could ever germinate in this inner vacancy. And now he amazed himself. He nodded.

"Yes," he said. And again — not caring about the madness of saying it aloud — "Yes. Any maybe one of them will be the Deliverer."

Coming Soon

Next month: A remarkable Christmas story, "Miriam, Messiah" by Dean Whitlock; "The Hero of the Night" by Bradley Denton; and a compelling contemporary ghost story by Jim Aikin titled "Dancing Among Ghosts."

Soon: The last story from the

late Russell Griffin, about the future of humor, "Takes All Kinds"; SF from Jack Dann, Brian W. Aldiss, Pat Cadigan, Harry Turtledove, Wayne Wightman, Alan Dean Foster and many others. Use the coupon on page 159 to enter your own subscription or to send a gift.



SCIENCE

I S A A C A S I M O V

THE ROAD TO HUMANITY

LAST NIGHT (as I write this) there was an hour-long program on WABC-TV, and during the last ten minutes or so, various well known personalities were asked to comment briefly on the subject matter of the program. Among the personalities was me.

As I watched, I could not help but ask myself, "Why am I included with all these people?" You see, for all my reputation as a man of colossal ego, I have never gotten used to my present position as "celebrity." That position didn't come overnight, after all, or as a result of any single remarkable event. In fact, for most of my life, there seemed no sign that I would ever come to anything.

I made my first professional story sale in 1938, when I was 18, and by the time I got married, in 1942, I had accumulated a bank account of \$400 from my writing. My parents were in no position to help me out;

I had no other relatives; and I certainly had no fairy godmother. My bride added \$300 to the kitty, so I began married life with \$700 in cash, and with a job that was going to pay me \$2600 a year, but would cease to exist when World War II ended or when I was drafted, whichever came first. My prospects were not bright.

By 1958, I was a little better off. I had a position as Associate Professor of Biochemistry at Boston University School of Medicine and my annual salary had reached the dizzying height of \$6,500 a year. In addition, I was earning \$15,000 a year through my writing.

However, I now had two children to support in addition to a wife, and I was so little a celebrity that the Director of the Medical School was annoyed with my neglect of research in favor of writing, and he fired me. By dint of hard fighting, I held on to my title, but my salary disappeared forever on June 30, 1958.

So there I was, 38½ years old, clearly middle-aged, with a family to support, with 30 percent of my income suddenly gone, and with absolutely no status or reputation except with a few loyal science fiction readers. My prospects were still not bright.

Yet I made it. I'm not sure how it happened, or exactly when. One of the reasons I undertook to write my autobiography ten years ago, and write it in great detail and in exact chronological order, going over my diary painstakingly from page to page, was in order that I might catch the moment when I suddenly emerged from my chrysalis.

It didn't help. I never found that moment. It had all happened so slowly, so gradually, so unnoticeably, that I was never aware of any change. By the time I came to the realization (with some disbelief) that I was a celebrity, it turned out that everyone else had considered me to be one for some years.

I suspect that's a common state of affairs and can be applied to matters of much more moment than the life of individual human beings. For instance, when and how did humanity come into existence? What was the key event? To answer that question, let's start at the beginning and progress along the road to humanity in twenty evolutionary steps.

1) 4,600,000,000 years Before the Present (BP). The Solar system, including the Sun and the Earth, has, at this time, formed out of a primordial cloud of dust and gas.

2) 3,600,000,000 BP. The first indications of life appear in the form of "prokaryotic cells." These are tiny cells such as those of bacteria and cyanobacteria. (The bacteria are without chlorophyll, while the cyanobacteria possess it.) Such prokaryotic cells exist today and are not very different from the cells that first formed so long ago.

3) 1,400,000,000 BP. After more than two billion years in which prokaryotes remained the only form of life on Earth, "eukaryotic cells" formed. These were single-celled organisms like the prokaryotes, but the eukaryotes are substantially larger and possess nuclei in which are concentrated the reproductive and hereditary functions of the cell. The eukaryotes may have formed through the combination of different prokaryotic cells that then, within an overall cell membrane, lived in symbiotic relationship with each other. Single-cell eukaryotes still live today — ameba, paramecia, algae, and so on.

4) 800,000,000 BP. At about this time, some eukaryotes went through the process of joining together to form multicellular organisms. All

multicellular organisms (including human beings) are made up of eukaryotic cells. The multicellular organisms evolved and diversified into numerous grand divisions called "phyla" (singular, "phylum," from a Greek word for "tribe"), both plant and animal.

5) 550,000,000 BP. Now, the first animals belonging to the phylum "Chordata" appear. This is the last phylum to make its appearance, apparently, and it is to this phylum that human beings belong.

The first chordates were primitive* creatures that did not seem very different from worms. They apparently arose from another phylum called "Echinodermata" (Greek for "spiny-skins"), of which the best-known representatives today are the various starfish. In fact, the most primitive chordate living today, the "balanoglossus," in its larval (that is, immature) state is so like echinoderm larvae, that it was first classified as an echinoderm.

The chordates differ from all other phyla in three ways. First, they possess a "notochord" during at least some stage in their development. This is a stiffening rod

that runs down the back, presaging the development of an efficient internal skeleton.

Second, they possess a hollow nerve cord down the back, just under the notochord. All other phyla have a solid nerve cord running down the abdomen. The chordate nerve cord eventually developed into a complex nervous system, superior to that of any other phylum.

Third, they possess gills, richly supplied with blood vessels, along which water passes and from which food can be strained and oxygen absorbed. This is an indication that chordates would eventually be better adapted to sea life than other phyla.

6) 510,000,000 B.P. From the primitive chordates, there now developed other chordates with additional characteristics. In place of the notochord, for instance, a line of "vertebrae" enclosed the nerve cord. They were separated so that the body could twist and the head could, eventually, turn ("vertebrae" is from a Latin word for "turn"). The first vertebrae were composed of cartilage, tough and flexible.

Chordates possessing vertebrae belong to the subphylum "Vertebrata," and these now include all chordates (including human beings) except for some very primitive and out of the way specimens like balanoglossus.

**"Primitive" and "advanced" are subjective words and represent the degree to which organisms resemble human beings in one respect or another. The greater the resemblance, the more "advanced" they are.*

The earliest vertebrates of note were "ostracoderms" (Greek for "tile-skins"), fish-like creatures without jaws. They were most notable for being the first to develop bone, which is to be found only in them and most of their descendants (including ourselves). The bone was most notably present as an outer casing that enclosed the head which contained, after all, the chief sense organs and the nerve cord swelling we call the brain. The present-day organism most closely related to the ostracoderms is the lamprey, a jawless, eel-like animal.

7) 440,000,000 B.P. From the ostracoderms, there evolved the Acanthodii (Greek for "spiny," since they possessed spines at their fins). They were the first vertebrates with jaws — developed out of the first gill arch (the cartilaginous stiffening bars at each gill opening). From these organisms seem to have been developed the "placoderms" (Greek for "plate-skins"), which had not only jaws, but also two sets of paired fins, for steering. These represented the beginning of the four limbs that all later vertebrates had, except in those cases where the two fore limbs were reduced to vestigial remnants (kiwis), or the two hind limbs (whales), or all four limbs (snakes).

The placoderms had plates of bony armor over the head and forepart of the body (hence, their name)

and were the largest and most formidable creatures of their time when they were at their peak.

8) 400,000,000 B.P. From the placoderms, there evolved the "Chondrichthyes" (Greek for "cartilage-fish"). In them, the bone was lost and the internal skeleton was composed of cartilage. The chondrichthians thus lightened their bodies without sacrificing security too much. What they lost in invulnerability, they more than made up for in the gain of mobility. The most familiar chondrichthians that survive to this day are the sharks.

At about the same time, from the acanthodians, there evolved the "Osteichthyes" (Greek for "bony fish"), which retained the bone but kept it inside the body where it made up the internal skeleton. The osteichthians and all their descendants (including human beings) retained the bony internal skeleton.

Not long after their appearance, the osteichthians divided into two branches. One were the "Actinopterygii" (Greek for "ray-fins"). Their fins were thin, with stiffening rays of cartilage and were admirably adapted for swimming and steering.

The other branch was the "Sarcopterygii" (Greek for "flesh-fins") who had two pairs of stubby, fleshy limbs with only a fringe of fin. Such fins were less good at swimming, but when a pool of water be-

came brackish, muddy, or threatened to become dry, a sarcopterygian could stump across a stretch of dry land to another pool. The pattern of bones in the stubby sarcopterygian fins were retained in all their descendants (including human beings).

The chondrichthians and the actinopterygians flourished and have continued to flourish, as sharks and fish, to this day, but they proved dead ends. No startling new developments were derived from them. The sarcopterygians, on the other hand, dwindled and all but died out. Only a few remnants are left, like the "coelacanth" (Greek for "hollow-spines"), which were discovered still living in the deeper ocean layers in 1938. Yet it was to the descendants of the sarcopterygians that the future belonged and from whom human beings were to descend.

9) 350,000,000 B.P. About this time, some sarcopterygians had evolved into organisms that could, in adult life at least, remain out of water for extended periods. Their stubby fins had become legs, and they had simple lungs that made it possible for them to gulp air and obtain oxygen in that way, rather than depending solely on oxygen that was dissolved in rivers, lakes, or the sea. They were the first vertebrates with legs, and the legs were retained in almost all their descen-

dants (including human beings).

These organisms had to lay their eggs in water, and from those eggs there hatched larvae that were much like fish, lacking legs and possessing gills. For that reason, these organisms were placed in the class "Amphibia" (Greek for "double life") within the vertebrate subphylum. Familiar amphibians alive today are the frogs and toads.

The amphibia were by no means the first organisms to invade the land. Plants had colonized the land some fifty million years before the amphibia arrived. Following the plants, in comparatively short order, were such organisms as snails, spiders and insects.

Amphibia, however, were the first land-living vertebrates, and they were the largest animals of any kind that had yet appeared on land. Some forms, now extinct, were armored and were as large as modern crocodiles. The weakness of the amphibia, however, was that they were tied to water in early life, and this limited their control of the land.

10) 300,000,000 B.P. About this time, certain amphibia developed an egg that was surrounded by a protective shell of thin limestone. The shell was permeable to air, but not to water. Air could reach the developing embryo inside, but water could not leave it. The embryo

developed in a small reservoir of water inside the egg, with an elaborate series of adaptations allowing the embryo to tuck wastes into special membranes. With such eggs, organisms could remain on land indefinitely and were freed of the necessity of water life.

The organisms with such a land-based egg belong to the class "Reptilia" (Greek for "creeping" since the most familiar reptiles in existence today are the snakes). The reptiles were able to colonize the land generally and became the dominant form of land life on Earth, at least in the sense that they were the largest. In fact, one reptile, now extinct, the brachiosaur, holds the all-time record as the most massive land animal that ever lived.

11) 270,000,000 B.P. The reptiles quickly diverged into a number of varieties, and at this time, there developed the "Theriodontia" (Greek for "beast-toothed"). Their teeth were more differentiated than were those of other reptiles (more like ours than like those of crocodiles, in other words). Some among them may also have developed the capacity of maintaining a constant internal temperature (above that of the environment, usually) rather than taking on whatever the outside temperature might be. The theriodonts may thus have developed "warm-bloodedness," where all

other organisms that existed till then seem to have been "cold-blooded." To cut down the loss of heat, some theriodonts may even have developed hair, a modification of the reptilian scale. (Later, birds evolved from other reptiles. They were also warm-blooded and developed feathers, another modification of the reptilian scale, to conserve heat.)

Warm-bloodedness, a property which all the descendants of the theriodonts (including human beings) retain, has the advantage of enabling an organism to remain active at all times, neither becoming torpid in the cold, nor suffering sunstroke in the heat. The price to be paid, however, is that warm-blooded organisms must eat much more than cold-blooded organisms of the same size if they are to find the energy to maintain body heat.

12) 220,000,000 B.P. The theriodonts did not flourish and eventually died out, but before doing so they gave rise, at this time, to varieties that developed teeth, jawbones, inner ear structures, and other characteristics that resembled those of organisms like ourselves more and more closely. These were members of a new class, "Mammalia" (Greek for "breasts" because modern organisms of the class had breasts that produces milk for the feeding of the young). Human beings are obviously mammals, therefore.

The earliest mammals were small shrew-like organisms that managed to exist only with difficulty in a world dominated by reptiles, and survived only because they were small and could hide. They may well have laid eggs and may have had only primitive breasts, if any. Three species of egg-laying mammals still exist in Australia and New Guinea. The duck-bill platypus is most familiar.

13) 100,000,000 B.P. The primitive mammals gained a new advantage by developing reproductive mechanisms that offered increased protection to the young. Certain mammals at this time evolved the ability of allowing their eggs to hatch while still in the body. When the young finally emerged (still very undeveloped) they could make their way into a pouch within which they could attach themselves to nipples and feed on milk till they were much better developed. Such mammals are called "marsupials" (Latin for "pouch").

Other mammals evolving about this time went even further. Not only were the eggs hatched within the body, but they could remain within the body, nourished by a "placenta" (Greek for "flat cake" because of its shape). Food could diffuse from the mother's bloodstream into the embryo's bloodstream across the placenta, while wastes

diffused in the opposite direction. The embryo could be developed within the body until it was in a comparatively advanced state. Such mammals are "placentals" and human beings are among them.

Among the placentals were an order of organisms known as "Insectivora" (Latin for "insect-eating"). The best known modern insectivores are the shrews and hedgehogs. They are primitive organisms, with unspecialized limbs that retain the five digits to each paw that were to be found in the first amphibians.

Some of these insectivores had a rather large brain for their size, and the first digit of the paw could separate somewhat from the rest, so that it seemed to represent the beginnings of a thumb. The best modern example of such an insectivore is a tree shrew that lives in southeastern Asia and rather resembles a squirrel in appearance.

14) 70,000,000 B.P. At this time, certain insectivores had developed characteristics that placed them into a new order, "Primates" (Latin for "first," a bit of egotism, since the order includes human beings). The first primates may not have been very different from tree shrews. Indeed, there has been a tendency to consider modern tree shrews the most primitive primates rather than the most advanced insectivores.

After a hundred fifty million years, mammals still had a precarious existence

15) 65,000,000 B.P. When the primates first appeared, the reptiles still dominated the land, and the mammals after a hundred fifty million years still had a most precarious existence. At this time, however, something happened. It may have been the collision of a small comet with the Earth, or it may have been something else, but most of the large reptiles (along with other kinds of organisms) died out rather suddenly.

Some of the mammals managed to survive the catastrophe whatever it was (as did some reptiles, for that matter). The mammals were now not competing with overwhelming numbers of large reptiles, and they had the chance to evolve into a wide variety of spectacular organisms, themselves. There were marsupials as large as modern hippopotami and placentals four times as large as modern elephants. On the whole, placentals proved more formidable than the marsupials, and the latter have survived, for the most part, only in Australia where, until the coming of human beings, placentals (except for bats) had not penetrated. Placentals dominated the rest of the world.

The giant mammals did not sur-

vive, however. The most successful mammals were those which were relatively small and agile. Mammals also evolved brains that were larger than those of other types of organisms of the same size, and this seems to have helped in survival.

Included in this drive toward brains were the primates, which eventually did remarkably well in this respect. In the modern world, the only non-primates to have brains that are larger than any primate brain are to be found in the order of "Cetacea" (Greek for "whale"), which includes the whales and dolphins, and in the order of "Proboscidea" (Greek for "to browse in front") which includes the elephants, whose trunks make it possible for them to reach far forward for vegetation.

These larger brains, however, must handle a *much* larger body. Where the largest primate brain has a mass that is 2 percent of the body it is in, the largest elephant brain is only 0.1 percent the mass of its body, and the largest whale brain only 0.01 percent. It is apparently the size of the brain compared to the body that counts, and not the size of the brain alone.

Within any group of similar animals, the brain/body ratio tends to

grow larger as the size grows smaller. A dolphin, weighing no more than a man, has a brain that is as much as 2.5 percent the mass of its body. However, dolphins, living in water, must have a streamlined body so that they lack irregular projections such as arms and hands. Furthermore, in the sea it is impossible to deal with fire, and that deprives the cetaceans of any chance of developing a technology. Their large brain therefore does them no good by primate standards.

Of course, small primates may have a higher brain/body ratio than larger ones do. Some small primates have a brain that is more than 5 percent the mass of the body, as is true of some hummingbirds, too. The total weight of the small-primate brain, however, is too small for the kind of overall complexity required for high intelligence and the hummingbird brain is far more minute still.

For a combination of large brain, small body, and land life, nothing can surpass the largest primate brain — which is, as you may have guessed, our own.

The early primates are represented today by the "lemurs" (Latin for "ghosts," because they are mostly nocturnal, appear dimly by night). They are found today, for the most part, in the island of Madagascar.

16) 55,000,000 B.P. At about this

time, a line of early primates evolved into the "Tarsiiformes." The only living species of these animals is the "tarsius" (so-called because of the unusually long bones in its ankles, or "tarsus").

These organisms had their two eyes both front and close together, rather than one on either side of the head as in other early primates. That made possible the use of stereoscopic vision and increased the detail they could see. The additional information received put a premium on brain size, and the tarsiiformes had larger brains than the other early primates. All the descendants of the tarsiiformes (including human beings) have these forward-looking eyes.

17) 40,000,000 B.P. At about this time, primates belonging to the sub-order "Anthropoidea" (Greek for "man-like") appeared. They did so, it is thought, from a branch of the tarsiiformes that are called "Omo-miyidae," all of which are now extinct, though their descendants survive. These descendants are monkeys, apes, and human beings.

The anthropoidians can all sit up easily so they can use their forepaws for handling and manipulating with greater ease. Their fingers and toes have nails rather than claws, so that the softer, more sensitive parts of the digits can be exposed for handling and manipulating.

The omomiyids were found in both the Americas and in Eurasia, and anthropid species developed in both places. These are popularly differentiated as "New World monkeys" and "Old World monkeys."

The New World monkeys have nostrils well separated and facing outward so they are called "Platyrrhini" (Greek for "flat noses"). They are relatively small, the largest weighing about 22 pounds, and have long tails. Some of the tails are prehensile and can be used as a fifth grasping device.

The Old World monkeys (which tend to be larger than the New World monkeys) have well defined noses, with the nostrils close together and facing downward so that they are called "Catarrhini" (Greek for "downward noses"). Clearly, we are descended from the Old World monkeys.

Many Old World monkeys have tails, but those tails are never prehensile. As though to make up for the lack of prehensile tails, the Old World monkeys have hands and feet that are more efficient at grasping than are those of New World monkeys. The Old World monkeys have better thumbs and stronger grips. Since this increased the flow of information it further encouraged an increased size of brain.

18) 30,000,000 B.P. At about this time, the Old World monkeys de-

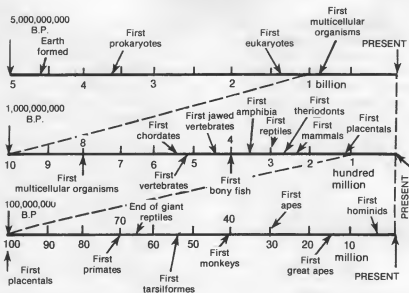
veloped a branch classified as the superfamily "hominoidea" (Latin for "manlike"). This superfamily includes both apes and men.

"Ape" was originally used for a tailless monkey, like the Barbary ape which is found in North Africa and on Gibraltar. The organisms we now call apes are, for the most part, larger than the Barbary apes, and, indeed, include the largest primates who have ever lived. They also more closely resemble human beings than any primates outside the superfamily do, so they are sometimes called "anthropoid apes" to distinguish them from tailless monkeys.

19) 17,000,000 B.P. The early apes were small, rather like the gibbons of today, which are the least advanced of the apes. At about this time, however, the subfamily "Ponginae" (Congolese for "apes") evolved. They are commonly called the "great apes."

The largest living great ape is the gorilla, which is over five feet tall and may weigh 500 pounds or more. Still larger is a now-extinct gorilla-like ape, "Gigantopithecus" (Greek for "giant ape"), which was nine feet tall and may well have tipped the scale at a thousand pounds or more.

The great apes are the most intelligent of the primates and have the largest brains. Leaving the hu-



man brain to one side, the largest primate brain is that of the gorilla, which weighs up to 19 ounces. The chimpanzee, which is a smaller ape, has a brain of about 13½ ounces, while the brain of the orangutan is about 12 ounces.

20) 5,000,000 B.P. Any pongid which resembles the modern human being more closely than it does any of the apes, living or extinct, is called a "hominid," and it is at about this time that the first hominid appeared.

The chimpanzee is the closest of all animals to the human in the genetic sense. Human genes and chimpanzee genes are so similar

that the amazement is that humans and chimpanzees are as different as they are. Very possibly, then, a common ancestor split into the two divergent lines about this time — a pongid from which the chimpanzee descended, and a hominid from which human beings descended.

The first hominids were comparatively small, perhaps four feet tall, no larger than the chimpanzees from whom they diverged and probably more lightly built. The hominid brain may not have been more than 15 ounces at first, scarcely more than that of a chimpanzee. However, the brain/body ratio in the early hominid was perhaps

twice that of a modern chimpanzee and four times that of modern gorilla.

Even the first hominids, then, may have been, at least marginally, the most intelligent land animals that had yet existed. Yet this is not the crucial point that made the hominid different. It was only a small matter of degree. There was

another difference that was much more important.

The first hominid *could walk upright* exactly as we ourselves do. This is something no other primate could do, and no non-primate either, in quite the same way.

I'll discuss the consequences of this next month.

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It's 1998 in John Shirley's new story. The setting is Hartford, Connecticut, which is split into suburb and shacktown, something that used to worry our hero, Barry Thorpe. What worries him now is his ad agency's new client, who is selling five minute vacations at \$1000.00 a minute. Mr. Shirley's most recent novels are ECLIPSE and ECLIPSE PENUMBRA, coming from Warner Books.

Ticket To Heaven

By John Shirley

I NEVER REALLY WANTED to go to Heaven. But I knew someone would make me. There was pressure on me to go to Heaven. Starting the morning I met Putchek. . . .

"Barry!" Gannick said when I dragged myself into his office. "Meet Frank Putchek, director of Club Eden."

"Hey," I said, "howya doin'." I smiled woodenly and shook Putchek's hand mechanically.

You have to understand that it was 3:30. I'd been in the office since nine — this not being one of your breezy, we're-all-chums advertising agencies where the idea men are permitted to be prima donnas — and I'd spent the morning thinking of ways to convince the public it needs Triple M brand Hamburger Enhancer. (Naturally we'd explain to the world that the three Ms should stand for Mmm! as in Mmm Good! Any jackass would have come up with the same thing, if they'd given it a moment's thought, and Triple M could've saved a bundle on an advertising agency. But agencies like mine thrive on the bad habits of industry. . . .) I spent lunch

flattering Jemmy Sorgenson from Maplethorpe and Sorgenson, in the hopes that she'd offer me a job at a better salary and maybe residuals. I'd spent the first part of the afternoon thinking of ways to convince the public it needed a certain carcinogenic artificial sweetener. And by 3:30, after a hard day of constructing artful lies and fighting the tides of self disgust, I was burnt, looking at the world through glazed eyes. By 3:15, everything in the office is flat and two dimensional, threatening to fold down into one-dee. By 3:30 some mysterious temporal voodoo arrests the clock, and the pace of time become a hunchbacked old lady with an aluminum walker. And that's when Gannick called me in to meet Putchek.

Putchek was a middle aged guy with a smallish head, chipmunk cheeks, and a seemingly infinite wealth of smile lines around his mouth and eyes. He smiled a lot, mostly with his mouth slightly open, looking goofy with his overbite. He was tall, round-shouldered, wore dandruff-flecked wire-rims. But he had a nice blue and dove-gray Pierre Hayakawa designer suit, and immaculate patent leather shoes.

I didn't notice all this at first. Only his spongy handshake and a sort of Putchek-shaped blur. He could've been part of the furniture.

Gannick, my boss, was sitting behind his desk in shirt sleeves, on his special chair to make him less midgetish, his high forehead a little less furrowed than usual, his small shoulders almost relaxed, his darting black eyes for once relatively stationary.

Gannick was happy about something. Putchek must represent a juicy account.

I screwed my smile down into something faint but superficially warm, and sat across from Putchek where I could look out the window at the chill, brittle spires of Manhattan's petrified forest. *Petrified*, I thought. *Me* too.

"Coffee, Barry?" Gannick asked me.

"No, thanks."

"He doesn't need coffee," Gannick said, pretend-confidingly to Putchek. "Or even cocaine. Barry Thorpe runs on adrenaline." He grinned to soften the sarcasm. I must've looked more wooden than I thought.

Putchek tried to get the joke and blinked at the two of us. "Oh, uh-huh. Heh heh."

Gannick said, "Barry, *Club Eden's Paradise Vacations* is our new ac-

count — I guess you've heard rumors—" I hadn't heard a word. "—and it's something a little, well, unusual, and since you, Barry, are a little, well, unusual—" He paused for everyone to chuckle, so we did. "I thought you ought to head this up."

He beamed, and I tried to look pleased. It was as if the strings operating the muscles of my face were stretched out, threadbare, because I couldn't quite manage the expression I wanted.

"You O.K., Barry?" Gannick asked.

"Just tired." I summoned a little focus, a little animation. "Well — have we got a prospectus or a press kit or . . . slides?"

"Slides of. . . ?" Putchek asked.

"The uh, resorts or—"

"There aren't any resorts!" Putchek brought his hands together as if he'd clap them, and then did a sort of joyful wringing instead, shifted on his chair, and said, a little impishly, "Club Eden doesn't send people to anywhere on this planet, ah, Barry."

It was my turn to blink in confusion. More of the room jumped into sharp focus. They had my attention. I turned to Gannick. "Correct me if I'm wrong — I know I'm a little out of it at times — but did I lose twenty or thirty years somewhere? Are we in the twenty-first century alluvasudden? Last I knew, it was just 1998; I'm sure of it. Interplanetary travel is unmanned, right?"

"It's a manner of speaking. We're not sending people to another planet, per se," Putchek explained. "We're sending them to another . . . another existential focal point. Another plane, to use the metaphysical jargon. . . . We send them to Heaven."

I looked at Putchek, and then at Gannick. "Heaven. Some kind of sensurround laser show, huh? — 360-degree screens, incense?"

Gannick said slowly, "Nuh-ope. They put you in a machine and . . . you really feel physically like you've gone someplace. A sort of mind-trip through, I guess, some kind of electronic stimulation of the brain or. . ." He shot a glance of polite inquiry at Putchek.

Putchek hemmed, getting ready to haw. "If ah, if you like. You can, ah, look at it like that." He glanced up at me. "It'd really help if you went there. Yourself. Then you'd . . . accept it." He looked embarrassed, then, stared at his reflection in his shoes, and his mouth was shut — as much as it would shut, with his overbite — and all of a sudden he worried me.

* * *

The next day was Saturday. Under the business-incentive labor laws, most of the population had to work on Saturday. But not me, I could potter around my weekend house with a drink in my hand. Getting gloomier as I got drunker, opaquing the windows and dialing the lights low, enjoying the gloom, hugging the house's darkness to my inner darkness. Thinking about the Club Eden demonstration I was supposed to go to on Monday.

We send them to Heaven, Putchek had said. Neurological heaven, I supposed. Some pleasure-inducing machine, perhaps.

Heaven, at Putchek's prices, was something only a few could afford.

I shrugged. What else was new?

I went to the picture window, thumbed the button, and the window glass rippled into transparency. The spring afternoon was startling, almost tastelessly garish after the artificial twilight of my house.

I blinked in the unwanted sunshine, and the whiskey made my head ache. Tumbler in hand, I looked out over one of Hartford's prettiest suburbs. Trees lined the street with newly budded clouds of soft green; here and there were the bright pom-poms of flowering fruit trees. I realized I had no idea exactly what kind of trees most of them were. I'd lived here for five years, and I didn't know what kind of trees were on the street. Or my neighbor's first name.

But I knew my neighbor was Security Passed. We were all Security Passed, in Connecticut Village. When you drove in, you showed the checkpoint guards your Residency Card, or gave a visitor's number. To get a Residency Card, to be passed, you had to have a B-3 credit rating, and of course no record as a felon. It was a closed community, but not internally gregarious; the late-20th-Century's fragmentation of true community feeling extends its anti-roots even here, where all looks cozy. We had television; he had interactive video and TV shopping networks. We had our life-styles. We had shrugged off the responsibility that acknowledging strangers brings. Because one stranger leads to another, and not very far beyond the checkpoint was the crumbling border of Hartford's Shacktown, swollen with strangers we didn't want to meet. And tried not to think about.

I wasn't always the model resident of Connecticut Village. I'd written some stuff for *The Reformist*, before I'd gotten scared into money hunting; before Gannick found me. What I'd written was pretty self-righteous, foolishly idealistic stuff. . . .

* * *

Every town has its Shacktown, squatter enclaves grown up in the cracks between the neat little high-security Urban Village units the cities have become; the refuge of the legions of homeless, the disenfranchised of every profession: those who worked in industry and oil, before hands-on industry became an overseas venture and oil became an obsolete energy source; those who worked in construction before the contractors went to 75 percent premolded structures and robotics. Those without white collar work skills; or those who'd failed to fit in with the country's biggest employer, the "service" industry, that great consumer-supply mechanism so like a chicken-feeding machine on a poultry ranch. . . .

The Shacktowns are tenanted by people who, a decade or two ago, built the affluence that the privileged feed off of now. Jobless blacks are in the Shacktowns, of course. And the old. Since the demographic shifts of the '70s and '80s, and the growth of geriatric medicine, the old have become a huge, mouldering slice of the population. And millions of them went discarded, forgotten, cold-shouldered by the post-welfare society: the fresh new, yuppie-shiny world where Entrepreneurs are messiahs, where those who failed to Earn are cast into the outer darkness, beyond the borders of the profit margin. . . .

Foolish stuff. The generalization of College Journalism. Anyway, why go on about it, when the response is always the same. They'll say, "So what?"

And if the Residency Committee knew I'd written the stuff for *The Reformist*, I'd never have been Security Passed for Connecticut Village.

Sometimes I passed Shacktown on the freeway. Just a sort of smudgy gray tumble of shanties glimpsed through the hurricane fence. From inside a microchip-driven car whistling smoothly down the freeway, the poor were reduced to a blur of embarrassment. The whole world became a visual shrug at a hundred and ten miles an hour. . . .

I knew there was bribery in it somewhere. I knew it when Gannick said, "The FDA's given Club Eden full approval. The patent bureau, everyone, they're lining up to give their blessing." It was the way he said it. Quick, with an undertone that warned me not to harp on the subject. So

I didn't ask why there hadn't been any newspaper talk about it yet. Obviously, they'd worked hard to keep it mum till federal approval was a fait accompli. Wouldn't want any nosy Senate subcommittees to delay approval. . . .

It was Monday afternoon, and we were in what was to be the Club Eden showroom. Me and Gannick and Putchek and Putchek's secretary, Buffy. She was a sort of human Happy Face who went by Buffy with no outward evidence of shame.

The showroom had been the front office of a large travel agency. The posters and brochure racks and desks and the fat middle-aged ladies with the snail-shell hairdos had been cleared out, and now there was only the transport rig, like a hump of frozen milk under the fluorescent lights in one corner of the room, and some paint-jigsawed newspapers around the freshly rolled walls.

I looked at the transport rig and told myself, *Take it easy; it's probably harmless.*

It looked harmless. It looked like one of those little imitation race-car seats you get into at a video arcade. Except, on the outside it was all designer-stylized, a sculptured teardrop of imitation mother-of-pearl. The little door was open. Inside there was a chair, and a few dials on a dashboard. No controls, nothing else. I asked, "No helmet? Something to wire into the brain, to create the illusion? Or do you just inject them with something and, uh—" I had to cough; a recent coat of freshly applied blue paint suffused the shuttered room with quivery fumes.

Putchek cleared his throat. "No. No other, ah, fixtures are necessary. It's mostly automatic."

Buffy, as might be expected, was short, pert, faintly plump, auburn-haired, and dimple-cheeked. She had silver-flecked china-blue eyes and stubby, pudgy white fingers awkwardly extended by three-inch glue-on nails; blue nails with white glitter. She wore a puce jumpsuit, which was her version of a test pilot's getup.

"I'm all ready!" she told Gannick, a trifle too eagerly. Her voice was breathy and maddeningly affected.

"Have you done this before, Buffy?" I asked.

"Oh, uh-huh, sure!" she lilted. "Mn-hmm, and we had a kinda test pilot guy, and before that, monkeys and pigeons."

"They're *still* using pigeons," Gannick whispered to me as she turned

and climbed into the machine. She closed the door behind her. The rig started to hum.

Putchek tilted his head back, as if listening to some beloved song. His dirty spectacles washed out in the light. "One of our big selling points," Putchek said absently, "is going to be a money-back guarantee."

Gannick's eyebrows shot up. "Money-back guarantee? That's a big risk, Frank. I mean, everyone I've met who's tried it is enthused — but there are all kinds of people out there. Brain chemistries, metabolisms — there're no two exactly alike. If there're even 20 percent who don't like the experience—"

"I can't go into all the details," Putchek said slowly, looking at himself in his shoes again, hands in his pockets. "But let's just say we are 99 percent confident that virtually everyone will like it. There's some risk. But it's worth it."

The rig's humming had risen in pitch — and I winced as it passed out of the audible range. I felt a ripple go through me, and a tightness in my chest, a pinching at the back of my throat. For the briefest of moments, I had a peculiar feeling that Buffy was all around me. It was cloying, believe me. And then the room was normal again.

Putchek glanced at the rig. "She'll be out in, oh, five minutes, vacation complete."

I looked at him. "What's the list price on this?"

"Once we get rolling, ah, five thousand dollars per vacation. We won't be selling the machines at all, for at least a decade. And it's gimmicked so anyone who tried to break into one to see how it works will find it's melted to slag inside."

"Five thousand dollars. . . ." I stared at him. "A thousand dollars a minute?"

I could feel Gannick glaring at me. *Don't offend the client*, the glare was telling me.

Putchek was unruffled. "Only objectively. It doesn't feel like five minutes to them. They think it's months. Depends on how subjective their personalities are. It'll feel like at least a month has passed. For some it may feel like an eternity. Of pure, uninterrupted happiness." He looked at me as if to say, *What Do You Say To That?* His head tilted back; his open mouth aimed at me — if I'd looked, I could have checked out his tonsils.

One of Putchek's technicians came in. He was a blond kid, with a

Samurai haircut; he was wearing an orange jumpsuit, with Club Eden ornately stitched onto each shoulder. He sang sotto voce along with something I heard only as a seashell sound leaking from his Walkman earphones. He carried a small box of microchips to the rig, snaking his head to the music. Putchek glanced at him in irritation. "Chucky, it's not that rig that needs the guidance chips; it's the other one."

But Chucky didn't hear him. He opened the door of the rig. It was empty.

Gannick put the scotch down in front of me and said, "Drink it." Like a doctor's command.

We were in Putchek's office, and I was in Putchek's chair. He was standing solicitously over me, making a motion with his hands like a fly cleaning its foreclaws, and on the other side of the desk, Gannick was glowering. His expression said, *You're making a great impression on the client. Just great.*

But the girl was gone.

"I'll be O.K.," I said. "I just . . . felt funny for a second." I looked at Putchek, and then rolled the chair back so he wasn't breathing on me. "Some kind of stage-magic cabinet?"

He shook his head. "She's gone, projected. Sliding between planes. We were going to let people believe it was . . . was all in the head, for a while. We thought they'd be too scared otherwise. But believe me — she—"

"My ears are burning!" Buffy announced, giggling, as she came into the room. She looked flushed, happy as a three-year-old with a mouthful of chocolate. "I'm O.K.!" she said. "I've been to Heaven."

Sometimes, alone at home, I looked at my free pass and tried to talk myself into taking the trip to Heaven. Gannick wanted me to take it, for promotional inspiration. Everyone else wanted to take it. All three of my ex-wives had called me and asked me to get them passes. Tickets to heaven. Just as if they hadn't called me subhuman, cold-blooded, and the other things I can't go into without my stomach knotting up. Betty and Tracy cooing at me, posing as affectionate little sisters. But Celia, of course said, "You owe me this and more, you bastard."

But I didn't go to Heaven myself. Not for a long time. I told myself it was because of Winslow. But no: Winslow was just an excuse.

He was a good excuse, because Winslow scares. I met him six months after Buffy vanished and came back. It was Friday night; I was in my weekdays apartment, packing to go out to my place in Connecticut. It was a time when I least brook interruptions. So when the doorbell rang and I opened the hall door, I snarled, "Yeah? *What?*" And then he flashed the holo. He flipped open his wallet, and the 3-D federal eagle spread its wings in the wallet, and across its breast was the luminous banner: *Jeffrey C. Winslow, Special Agent, Food and Drug Administration.*

"Mr. Barry Thorpe?"

"Uh. Useless to deny it, right?"

Winslow didn't crack a smile. He was black-suited, with the fashionable bureaucrat's triple-tongue necktie — and he was an albino. An apparition. The Ghost of Bureaucracy Past, I thought. Carrying an alumitech briefcase instead of a ball and chain.

He looked at me with an expression stark as a No Trespassing sign. "I'm doing a series of interviews, Mr. Thorpe, to follow up on our Temporary Approval of Club Eden. May I come in?"

"You got the wrong guy. I'm just the barker, I don't own the carny. You want to talk to Putchek. Maybe Gannick."

"I've talked to them. I'll be talking to them again." He waited. The FDA is responsible for more than food and drugs; Club Eden used a machine that affected people physically, hence it was under their jurisdiction. And hence, Winslow.

Resignedly, I said, "Come on in."

He was all questions. No accusations. And all the questions seemed routine. "When you interview a returned vacationer for an endorsement, are they paid for the interview?" Things he already knew the answer to. Until he slung this one at me underhand: "Are you aware of any sums paid by Mr. Putchek or Mr. Gannick or their representatives to agents or functionaries of the FDA?"

I thought: *No, they don't tell anyone but the guy they're bribing.* But all I said was, "No."

"Thanks very much." He stood up and gave me a limp handshake. "That'll do it for this time." And he left.

This time?

I went out to a bar, found a phone book, and called Gannick.

"It's nothing," he told me. "There's a little bureaucratic power struggle

In heaven there are no pigeon droppings; there is no smog, no acid rain . . .

at the FDA. And this guy Winslow works for the guys trying to pull off the coup. They want to prove wrongdoing on the part of the FDA commissioners, take over their jobs. But they got nothing. Uh . . . did he ask about the Charred Pad effect? Corporeal side effects?"

"No. *What* side effects are those? Gannick, I'm supposed to get the straight scoop on this stuff when I—"

"Hey, we're not holding out on you. Nothing important. Don't worry about it; it's all bullshit. Hey, I got a steak burning; I gotta go— Listen, Barry: just head out to Connecticut and forget it."

I knew Gannick's Don't Ask Questions If You Love Your Paycheck tone. So I hung up, and tried to forget about Winslow.

God knows, it sounded good when people described it.

I was in my office, brainstorming a new One Minute Spot for the commercial breaks in the Federal Broadcasting Agency's new prime-time hit: "Yoshio Smith: Assassin for the CIA." Club Eden was the main sponsor for the show.

I was watching a videotape of the writer Alejandro Buckner, talking about his first Club Eden vacation. He was beaming, still in afterglow. Buckner was round-faced, and normally he looked like a sadistic Cupid; today he was positively cherubic. "Heaven is not Christian, particularly; there is no biblical God in evidence, no angels, precisely, though the Prefects of Heaven perhaps fill the bill. But Heaven will satisfy the Christian, the Buddhist, or the Hindu. Anyone.

"Some people have claimed Heaven looks different for everybody — but it isn't really so. It's got a landscape, definite topographical features. . . . It just depends on which part you tend to get projected to. And that's decided by your personality. Some people are projected into the pastoral Heaven, some of them into the urban one. Many into the one that's a sort of idealized suburb. Me, I'm an unabashed urban Heaven man — only, it was a series of rooftop gardens; a sort of Hanging Gardens of Babylon variation of the great penthouses of Manhattan. But of course, in Heaven there are no pigeon droppings; there is no smog, no acid rain; there are no

thudding helicopters, screaming jets — though you might see some aerial gliders, impossibly graceful; everything has a sort of nimbus, like when you do certain drugs — but when you look close, you see it's just the shine off that thing's perfection, the natural glow of its excellence; you don't get tired in Heaven, but sometimes you sleep, and it's somehow just when the people around you want to sleep; there are no mosquitoes, no venomous things, no maggots, no defecation, no halitosis; there *is* sex in Heaven, however you like it, but it's more like dancing — somehow it loses all its earthly clumsiness. And it never become excessive, even though the orgasms are slow, full, and not enervating. Food exudes from the tables as you need it, but you never fall into gluttony. You cannot break your bones; you cannot fall ill. Nothing dies. Everything is easy, but nothing is dull. There are no conversational dullards; no faux pas, or awkward silences. There are sharp smells, and soft smells, but no bad smells. I say again that Heaven is not in the least dull. There are storms, and there is snow — but only when you're in the mood. There is contention there, but never acrimony; all contention is glorious sport, in Heaven."

It can't be that perfect, I thought. I didn't want it to be. Perfection is suspicious, is improbable, and I wanted Heaven to be real. So I was relieved when he said, "You can't do just anything you want there. If you want to interrogate the other entities — they look like people, but then again, they don't; they're all sort of soft-edged and shimmery — anyway, if you want to ask awkward questions about the place, then you've brought a lot of 'inappropriate psychodynamics' with you, as one of the Prefects said to me. You've brought 'neurotic attachments.' All inappropriate in Heaven. So the Prefects — they look like firefly glows, without the fireflies, and much larger — they swarm up to you and sort of smooth you out, and then you forget all your pushiness, your capacity for violence . . . your questions. Your questions are answered only with a sort of impression: that the place is indeed something you're supposed to have earned. That it's a 'higher state of communion with the universe.' And that should be enough for you. . . . But there's something else kind of funny about the place. . . ."

I leaned forward, sharply attentive.

Buckner said abstractedly, "The entities who are there all the time, who are native to it, well, they look at you like . . . um, they don't really snub you or anything; there's nothing unfriendly . . . but there's a sort

of benevolent surprise. As if they sense that you don't belong there. . . .

The tape ended there. Gannick's interviewer hadn't liked the direction Buckner was taking, and we had enough "good review" from him anyway. The tape ended, and the regular transmission on the TV monitor came on — I started to switch it off, but found myself watching. It was a news bulletin.

Four tenements had collapsed an hour earlier, in the Bronx. About 270 people were feared injured or dead. "Portions of the buildings just seemed to crumble into dust," the housing commissioner was quoted as saying. "Something similar happened about two weeks ago in Chicago — also a low-rent area — and we think it's a result of termite damage or acid rain damage to these old buildings."

Insects or acid rain or both. Oh. An explanation. It felt good to have an explanation for something like that. Even one that felt *wrong* when you really big. Thousands of people have gone into these pits. They're all caught up in some kind of . . . of inertia. Despair. So they don't fight it. You can feel the pit pulling at you. . . ." He was right' I felt the pit tugging at me, want you to know that if you want to tell me anything, anything at all, I will see to it that it'll be safe for you. With respect to prosecution."

"You're with the FDA, not the FBI, Winslow. You seem to get them mixed up."

"Let's just say that this investigation is a little special. If you can tell me about the Corporeal Side Effects report on the Club Eden phenomena—"

"I really don't know what you're talking about," I said sincerely.

"If you want to play that game — fine. But we'll see who wins."

"FDA, Winslow, FDA. The other one is the Federal Bureau of—"

He hung up.

I shrugged. But then I thought: *Either he's a loon, or we're in trouble and we don't know it.*

Don't think about it. It's Gannick's problem.

I went home.

I sat in my confoam chair, nestling into its articial hug, with the windows opaqued and the lights dimmed, playing my hiding game, pretending it was nighttime and dark out; anyway, it was dark in. I sat there sipping Johnnie Walkers and listened to the TV talk about vacationing in

Heaven, and I thought: *I don't like this life. I don't like this world. So why don't I go!*

The Special Report anchormen talked about "the Club Eden phenomenon." Described the depression and ennui Club Eden returnees slipped into when the afterglow wore off. Noted that there was no actual physical addiction, but there *was* an indication of compulsiveness. "After you get over the depression," a returnee told the cameras, "you get back into the groove of regular life. Everything seems kind of dingy and dirty and tired and stiff, for a while — but pretty soon you start to enjoy life again, and, you know, you stop yearning for Heaven all the time. But as soon as you've got the money again, man, you *sign up!*"

Certain psychiatrists, whom I knew to be in the pay of Club Eden, made great, soft-edged, rolling claims for the therapeutic benefits of a Club Eden vacation. A few southern senators muttered darkly about the religious implications. Club Eden had stopped calling the projection plane "Heaven," but that's what everyone thought it was. So the Moral Majority stamped their feet and pouted.

Senator Wexler called for an investigation into the risks, stating it was only a matter of time before the transport rigs went haywire and projected someone into a mountain, or the ocean — or maybe into Hell. And if that didn't happen, there was danger in the use of "bootleg" transport rigs — all the bootleg rigs, so far, had turned out to be fraudulent. Club Eden had resisted franchising. It held onto the monopoly with all the legal strength that the \$400 million they'd made could give them. That was a lot of strength.

After the Special Report, I had my third scotch, and listened to the regular newscaster dolefully announce that, yes, the government had admitted that the country was sliding into a severe recession. Yes, there was a rather unexpected oil shortage, a general energy crunch, epidemic problems with power plant generators around the country; indeed, around the world. . . . And the Shacktowns were growing.

I rewound the cassette, so I could listen to Buckner again, and take notes.

Club Eden was hot. Club Eden was The Buzz. There was suspicion, outrage, investigations. But Club Eden kept on through it all, and Gannick and I did our work.

* * *

Don't take Paradise for granted . . . until you've tried Club Eden. And: So you think this [a slick Kodachrome photo of glorious South Pacific beach: deep blue sky, crystal waters, emblematically perfect palm trees] is Paradise! You haven't tried Club Eden. And: Club Eden: Who needs drugs!

I had my free pass, locked up in my desk at home. Gannick encouraged me to go. Putchek encouraged me. Putchek went himself sometimes. There was a limit to how often you could go, and how long you could stay, something to do with electromagnetic stress on the body, but Putchek went as often as the safety regiment would allow.

Gannick didn't go. He said poker at the club with a pretty girl bringing the dry martinis was heaven enough for him.

"But I want you to go," he said. "O.K., Barry?"

So I sat in my apartment on a Saturday evening, a year after Buffy had vanished and come back, thinking about using my pass. Not worrying about Winslow — he'd come only once more, and it had been more of the same. I'd almost forgotten about him.

The Shacktowners couldn't afford a ticket to Heaven. But I had one. So why didn't I use it?

I went to the safe I kept the pass in, and I opened it. I looked at the pass. I couldn't quite—

That's when the doorbell rang, and somehow I knew it would be Winslow.

Guiltily, I locked the pass away and opened the door for him — and stared. He looked different now. The veneer was gone. So was the badge and the alumitech briefcase. He wore a cheap printout paper suit and dark glasses; and the left lens on the dark glasses was cracked. He smelled like beer, and he listed to the right.

I was seeing a different Winslow here, and I liked him better. "Gotta talk to you," Winslow said.

"Come on in and have a drink," I said. "As if you needed one."

He reached into a pocket and took a gun from it. It was small, a .25, but it would put a hole right through me, at this range. "No. You come out. We're going for a drive."

We were walking along a pitted gravel road, under a lowering gray sky. The clouds at the horizon were reddening in sunset and beginning to shed

rain; in the red tint it looked as if the clouds were bleeding. We walked between the shanties of Shacktown, through smells that would have stopped me like a brick wall if the gun hadn't been in Winslow's coat pocket. Winslow was talking, talking, talking, with a sort of excessive care that only underlined his drunkenness. "Mr. Danville — my supervisor — and I received a sort of anonymous tip, a transcription of a conversation between two lawyers, one for a certain Janet Rivera and the other working for Club Eden. Club Eden was offering Janet Rivera a fat settlement, a million dollars, and she took the money and ran. It seems that with a very minor adjustment of the transport rig — or a power surge at the wrong time — the vacationer will arrive in something very like Hell. Perhaps it's like this. . . ."

He gestured vaguely at the packed-in, mud-encrusted, sewage-reeking shanties; the drawn faces peering from beneath plastic sheets nailed over crooked doorways. He went on, "Perhaps it's worse. Ms. Rivera was sent to Hell. Apparently, Ms. Rivera barely kept her sanity. . . . Watch out, that dog wants a piece of your thigh. He's wild. . . ." It was a bony yellow mongrel, its eyes cloudy, its muzzle ribbed with a snarl. Winslow took the gun from his pocket and said, "This'll feed some-a these kids." The gun cracked, making me jump, as he shot the dog in the head. Its legs buckled, and it fell twitching. An old woman, muttering to herself, scurried out and dragged the dead dog by the tail into her hut.

"The transcript got us interested," Winslow went on as we continued down the road. (I glanced over a shoulder and saw a small crowd following us at a careful distance; a convention of scarecrows.) "And we saw our chance to pull down the commissioners. They were corrupt, and we'd had enough. We probed, and probed, and came up with something we didn't expect. A correspondence between the increase in Club Eden vacationers and the statistical deterioration of the living conditions of people around them. Putchek knew about it: it was called 'Launchpad Charring' because they likened the trips to Heaven to the launchings of rocket ships — and the launchpads are charred by rocket-ship engines, Thorpe. Club Eden's launchpad is our world; its charring is the side effects on the world: the worsening recession, the widening gap between rich and poor. And as it went on, the exchange became more . . . more literal, Thorpe. Look." He gestured at something. . . .

We had come to a pit in the earth. It was about four hundred yards

across, and deeper than I could see, and coated with fine gray-black dust. The shanties were built right up to its rim; those nearest it were half fallen, partly sunk in soft, ashen ground.

Thick, oily drops of rain pattered down, freckling the gravel and drumming tin rooftops, drumrolling faster and faster as the downpour increased. Under its impact, three of the shacks around the rim of the crater collapsed at once, buckling like a shot dog, crumbling like sand castles under a wave; I heard human voices crying out from the shambles, a dissonant choir, wailing; glimpsed faces in the muddy ash, faces stamped with resignation. Swallowed up a moment later. "There are lots more like these, Thorpe. All over the world. They sprang up after Club Eden got really big. Thousands of people have gone into these pits. They're all caught up in some kind of . . . of inertia. Despair. So they don't fight it. You can feel the pit pulling at you. . . ." He was right: I felt the pit tugging at me, a sort of vacuum sucking at my sense of self-worth, my need to survive. Pulling me apart, making me want to take a step forward, to pitch myself in. . . .

"There's a federal cover-up of all this—," Winslow was saying.

"Shut up," I said. I wrenched my gaze from the pit. The urge to throw myself in had almost overwhelmed me. I couldn't stand it there anymore. "Shoot me or not," I said. "I'm leaving." I turned and started walking back the way we'd come.

I waited for the gunshot. After a moment he was walking beside me, hunched against the rain. Once, he had to fire into the air to disperse the crowd. But in twenty minutes we were in his car.

"Perhaps what happened to me and Danville is part of the pattern of effects that hits anyone who doesn't visit Heaven," Winslow said. "Perhaps it'll hit you, eventually." We sat in his car, listening to the rain hammer the roof. He took off his sunglasses and focused his pink eyes on nothing at all. "We were fired. They said we'd gone beyond the confines of our job, which we had. That we'd made things up. We hadn't." He tugged idly at a sleeve of his paper suit; the acid rain had worked on it, and the sleeve came away in his fingers. "I've run out of money. My clothes are rotting on my back. But what matters — what should have mattered . . ." He looked at me. ". . . are those people out there."

I didn't say anything. I was choking on what I had seen.

He said, "Why didn't you take the trip?"

"Just a feeling. That it was going too far into pretending that everything was all right. That it was going too far to wallow in our private Heaven when there are so many people in Hell. It was always wrong, but this way I couldn't look away, somehow. . . . It was just a step too far. . . . Guilt, I guess, is what it boils down to."

"You had the right instincts, Thorpe. I knew it when I interviewed you — I could tell the whole thing bothered you. I did my homework on you. Read those pieces you wrote a few years back. I know you're not happy about what you do for Gannick: persuading people to squander millions on pointless consumption of crap. It *bothers* you. But you were addicted to the money."

"Mostly I was just scared. Of not having an income big enough to save up a safety margin. I was scared of ending up like those people. . . . So I had to do it."

"No, you didn't. You don't. You saw what it led to. . . . So, Thorpe — what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't have any proof of bribery. Or anything else. And let me tell you something: the public doesn't want this thing to go sour. They don't want it questioned, or fought. They want Heaven, and damn the consequences, and they're paying into a lot of senatorial campaigns to see to it their chances for Heaven aren't disturbed. I can't do a goddamn thing."

"You're wrong, Thorpe. What you can do is, precisely, a God Damned Thing."

I knew what he wanted me to do. No reason I should do it. I could get away; I could escape this. I could begin going to Heaven myself. I could. . . .

I couldn't. I saw the faces whose expressions had gone to dust. I felt the suction of the entropy pit. Having seen that, I was transformed by knowledge. I had lost my moral innocence. And knowing: I couldn't turn my back on it. "What do you want me to do?"

"It starts with a trip to Heaven."

It's going to be hard, Winslow had said. Maybe the hardest thing you've ever done.

It was. It was like someone who loved puppies being forced to throttle one; it was like seeing your mother for the first time in ten years, and then — though you love her — having to spit in her eye at the moment of reunion.

It was being in Heaven and spurning it. The vista was sweet, soft, warm, like living in an Impressionist's landscape — and, like great Impressionism, never dull. I was nude but unashamed; for the first time I felt nudity without awkwardness. I was drifting weightless over the treetops, basking in just the right amount of sunshine, feeling the caress of the music they gave off, and reveling in the surge of joy that was arrival: the sight of Friends (Friends I had never known before) awaiting me in the garden, turning with a luminous gladness in their faces—

I wrenched myself away and began to Seek.

The act brought the Prefects of Heaven; they emanated from the trees like a thought from a synapse, and spiraled gracefully round me: soft lights, living questions. They drew closer, to assuage the misplaced Desire in me — but, with a crackle of lightning that was an expression of Will, I thrust them back. Refused to let them soothe me into Heaven.

What, then? they asked.

Without speaking, I asked them: How is it we're permitted here at all? For surely this place was something to be earned.

You are permitted here because you have come here. The Great Organizer has made this place; the Great Organizer is the living Principle, who creates all orderliness and harmony. You are here, in Absolute Harmony, so the Organizer must intend it.

I told them what had happened on our world, to the poor. How things had worsened. I asked them why it had happened.

There are Laws regarding the conservation of matter and energy. If you fill a cup from a bottle, the bottle will be that much emptier. Your world is the bottle. Your privileged are emptying it out: the others must suffer. There are machines of metaphysical truth that underlie physical things. You have tampered with the machines. Your wealthy surround themselves with stolen Grace, with unearned Grace: with the subatomic essence of orderliness, stolen from the exploited. This stolen Grace prevents them from paying the price: so others must.

This place, then, is no supernatural paradise?

It is a function of Law: all laws incorporating what you call Physics, all laws of what you call Science, and laws your people haven't learned. This place is a great device; just as in your world a church is a physical construct to represent the idea of holiness, here we used a physical construct to materialize holiness.

Heaven is created by a machine?

Yes. *A machine birthed by the great Machine that is the universe.*

Then tell me how I can make adjustments, to right the imbalance in the machine, to arrest the deterioration on our end of things.

The obvious, they said.

"For me, it began with a can opener. I saw a hand holding an old-fashioned can opener, the kind you have to stab into the can. But the hand was stabbing it into my naked belly, opening it like a lid, sawing toward my groin; through the pain I looked harder at the hand and saw it was my own. I could not say that I had no control over it. I controlled the hand, but I was making it cut me open. I was no masochist; I did not enjoy it. I screamed for it to stop, and I meant it. After a while the wound went away, but of course, by then I was making another. Not wanting to, but doing it voluntarily. The paradox sneered at me. At the same time I was watching the great screen where my humiliations and stupidities replayed, and knew my mother watched on another screen as I bought the favors of a small boy in Spanish Town. . . . My sensations of humiliation and suffering, in all their permutations, were not diminished in the least by time or familiarity. None of it brought me relief or a sense of expiation. . . . Later I found gasoline and tools and grass with dog shit on it, and I used all these things to—"

—From an interview with
Frank Putchek, in the security
ward of Bellevue Hospital's
Mental Health facility

It was imprinted in my mind when I came back from Heaven. The Prefects had imprinted the adjustments: the literal, electronic adjustments, the equations for the new guidance chips to go into the transport rig. We went from one Club Eden transport station to another, across the country, Winslow and I, wearing the Club Eden technician's jumpsuits I'd stolen, pretending to be doing routine service checks. Making the adjustments.

We set it up so our readjustments applied exclusively to the new ten-minute vacations, which were available only to the wealthiest vaca-

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"Ticket To Heaven" from page 158

tioners. The industrial barons, their spoiled children; the corporate vampires; the corrupt politicians.

And of course, there was Putchek. We saw to that. Because Winslow had spoken to Putchek, who had admitted he'd known early on about the side effects of granting First Class Tourist passage to Heaven. Putchek had known, and had not cared. Putchek was the first to go; the first of many.

By degrees, it began to work: the suffering of the exploited and the abandoned began to be reversed, and some of the garbage pits became gardens. The ashpits cleared up like the healing of geological chancres. The Shacktowners found strength: they organized, and built, and made demands. There was no utopia there, and never will be. But there was dignity, and soon there was food and shelter.

We restored the balance. The adjustments worked. It worked because Club Eden had gotten sloppy about security. Which meant we were able to send a surprisingly large number of people to Hell.

But then again, maybe that shouldn't have surprised us.

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